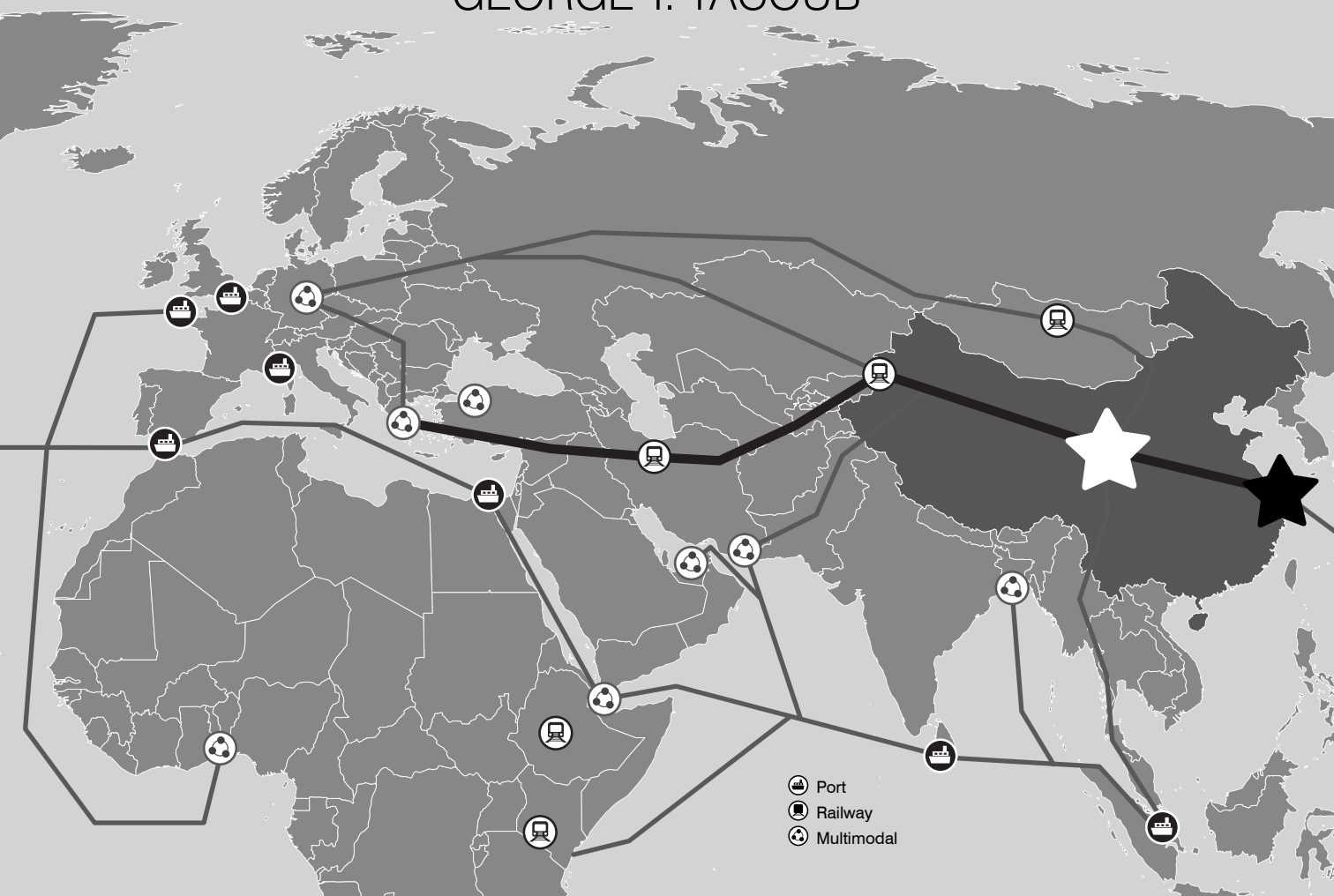


# SYRIA JOINS CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

PRESIDENT ASSAD CASTS OFF SYRIA'S  
SYKES-PICOT LEGACY

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# PREFACE

China's rapidly growing global presence on the international stage has been the subject of scores of books, scholarly articles and media bulletins. The two books by the Oxford historian Peter Frankopan, "The Silk Road (2015)" and "The New Silk Road (2018)" provide an excellent introduction to China's rapid rise to super-state status. These books rekindled my interest in China. In the seventies, I made frequent business trips to the Far East and became familiar with Chinese culture, especially Taoism and Confucianism. I was fascinated by its people's deeply rooted sense of identity, their dynamism and readiness to absorb new ideas without abandoning their own heritage. Unfortunately work, distance and language impeded my delving further into developments in China.

These notes were prompted by Syria joining China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This momentous move of "Grand Strategy" has the potential of enabling Syria to counter the repeated wars aimed at "dividing and ruling" it since World War I. My initial plan was to rewrite my "notes to file" on the subject in not more than three pages. As I proceeded, and driven by overwhelming curiosity, my writing acquired a momentum of its own, leading me from one issue to another. This exercise explains China's BRI and the implications of Syria's participation in it.

I have described Syria's move as a "Grand Strategy" because it has all the necessary characteristics of being long-term and involving the state's instruments of power. It is intended to achieve Syria's high priority national interests of economic growth and reconstruction, as well as national security. In 2005, President Bashar Al Assad recognized the strategic value of Syria's geographic centrality. Drawing the correct lessons from its history and foreseeing its future potential, he set out his vision of making Syria an "energy nexus" through his "Four Seas" initiative which he presented during his state visit to Turkey in 2009. At the time he could not persuade Turkey and Iraq to join in, so the plan faltered. Now that Syria has joined BRI, Assad's Four Seas project falls within the scope of China's maritime and Silk Road strategy and can be revived.

I dedicate this essay to my father, who though himself illiterate, spared no effort to provide for my education. He encouraged me to see books not only as a source of knowledge but also of inspiration. During school vacations I spent several hours every week reading historical novels and political commentaries aloud to him. He frequently told me, "Any education, no matter how rudimentary or poor is better than illiteracy, but also the best education is wasted if it does not provoke further thought, and a craving for more knowledge". His last advice was, "no matter what you achieve or how much you learn, never forget that true knowledge goes hand in hand with humility and both are endless".

I wish to thank my friend Jawad Adra for his illuminating comments and questions. I am most grateful to my wife Joannah for editing my drafts and correcting my mistakes of syntax and grammar. All errors and omissions remain totally mine

**London: June 25<sup>th</sup> 2022**



# 1. INTRODUCTION

President Bashar Al Assad is the first Arab leader to cast off geographic Syria's Sykes-Picot legacy by joining China's Belt and Road Initiative (hereafter referred to as BRI). The term Geographic Syria is used deliberately to underline two basic facts often ignored by many analysts. Firstly, as part of Europe's imperialistic policy of divide and rule, the Sykes-Picot Agreement destroyed the centuries' old socio-economic unity of the "Levant" (Greater Syria and Mesopotamia). Secondly, by joining BRI, Syria has opened the door to a new game of nations that could provide opportunities to undo the legacy of World War I.

On Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> of January 2022, Syria signed an agreement with China to join the Chinese "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI). This, the most momentous strategic move in the region since the end of World War I in 1918, could be the final nail in the coffin of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, and an opportunity to start undoing, at least partly, its consequences of dividing and reorganizing Syria's political geography.

Under President Assad, Syria has made a huge strategic leap to bolster its security and to proceed with reconstruction and its socio-economic development. This is just the starting point of a long and difficult path which will demand a new political vision, strategies and planning. Perseverance, foresight and sensitivity to the political aspirations and material needs of the people will be mandatory. For Syria this will be a new political and economic experience. The Syrian government should make its success a priority.

It will not be an easy task. Internally, there will be management problems and logistical bottlenecks. Externally, there will be opposition in the form of intervention destabilization and occupation. Antagonism to this Chinese-Syrian project will come not only from Syria's foes but also from China's adversaries. Reports published daily in the international media suggest that already a formidable coalition to sabotage this project is forming between the US, its Western allies and its Middle Eastern puppet regimes. For the time being, Russia, its hands full with Ukraine, has adopted a "wait and see" position. However, Russia must be concerned about China's move, if not as a potential threat, at least as a serious competitor to its influence in Syria. China's economic prowess, financial capabilities and strategic interests enable it to offer Syria security and economic assistance at a much lower cost than Russia could ever do.

Russia's decision to mount joint patrols with Turkey in northeast Syria, one day after Syria's signature of the BRI Memorandum of Understanding with China is not coincidental. It is a message to Syria not to go too far. Despite sweet talk about "brotherhood in blood" and a "firm strategic partnership" with Syria, the hard facts suggest that Russia is pursuing its own agenda in Syria even at the expense of the latter's core national interests. The Syrians have bitter experience of double standard politics and are likely to become soon disenchanted with Mr. Putin's ball juggling diplomacy, such as bargaining with the Americans, cajoling the Turks and flirting with Israel.

To date the Syrian leadership, out of dire necessity, has kept the alliance with Russia on an even keel. One does not have to be an intelligence expert to see that public pressure is mounting to end the war in Syria. The Russians appear to be using the old imperialist tactic of maximum exploitation. If this continues, even President Assad will be unable to tolerate Mr. Putin's prevarication which is aimed at keeping Syria dependent on Russia for its security. Hence, Russia's fear of being elbowed aside by China is not unrealistic. It is worth noting that for more than four centuries Russia has tried unsuccessfully to obtain a foothold in the "warm waters of the Mediterranean." Now that they have succeeded, Mr. Putin should not repeat the mistakes of his communist predecessors during the last days of the Soviet Union. Many say history does not repeat itself. However, false analogies do. Mr. Putin could do Russia a great disservice if he thinks he can pretend to be Peter the Great and act as Ivan the Terrible.

Since Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, President Assad has proven that he perceives the political sentiments and ideals of the Syrian people and has the courage and confidence to work towards the wishes of his people, regardless of the enemies he faces. Mr. Putin will be well advised to take this fact into serious consideration. Syria's move to join China's BRI should be viewed from this perspective. This master stroke of "grand strategy" gives Syria the space, time, flexibility and options to ensure its security, sovereignty and economic growth.

## 1.1 GENERAL SETTING

This exercise has a dual purpose. Firstly, to examine Syria's joining the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and to explain its important impact on the future political development not only of Syria, but of the entire region. Secondly, to highlight the vast spatial dimensions of this project and its strategic and socio-economic reach at a turning point in the history of Syria's international relations. Syria has now a great opportunity to undo the damage inflicted on its political geography after World War I.

A brief assessment of the opportunities offered, and the risks involved is an integral part of this exercise.

The present political turmoil in the Middle East, especially in Syria, cannot be properly understood outside the context of the struggle for power between the USA and China. Nothing on this scale has taken place in the region since the beginning of the Twentieth Century. It is therefore vitally important to view China's quest for the development of its BRI as a vital part of its global geopolitical struggle for the Middle East. The concurrent political unrest and wars engulfing Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Iran might be spatially separate, but are in fact closely interconnected and interactive.

The scope of this exercise has been limited to The Syrian Arab Republic, simply because of its current strategic importance. As the latest entrant into the Chinese BRI, Syria is breaking new strategic grounds which carry significant political, economic, and security benefits to all parties concerned. Syria's geographic centrality, its ancient and established trading traditions and its natural resources enable it to play a crucial role at this critical juncture in its history in China's network of land routes, railroads, sea lanes and port facilities.

The BRI is described by Chinese officials as a global apolitical strategy of economic development based on cooperation and benefit rather than exploitation and hegemony. It is premised on fair and



mutually beneficial relations among nations, people and states regardless of size, wealth, power or location. To date, its track record is credible and signals a new approach to international relations based on confidence building and interdependence.

## 1.2 HISTORICAL BACKDROP

China's endeavor to establish long-range intercontinental venues of exchange and communications run deep in its history. Its present plans to extend its economic and political interests can be better appreciated in the context of its history and past experience.

Chinese history spans more than three millennia and has witnessed the rise and fall of several great empires and civilizations. Over long periods of this history, China was vigorous, unified, powerful and wealthy. However, it also suffered several spells of internal strife, disastrous wars, economic stagnation and submission to other powers. The Qing Dynasty, from 1644 to 1911, was China's last. During this period, it alternated between short periods of peace and longer period of internal feuds, complicated by foreign intervention. However, unlike many ancient empires and civilizations, China did not perish but, throughout its long history, managed to bounce back, rising to glory from ashes.

**“ To maintain this gigantic economic growth and the rapid pace of its domestic socio-economic development, reviving the ancient Silk Road concept was an imperative. Firstly, it provided a continuation of China's historical experience in establishing economic and cultural relations with countries west of its borders. ”**

Students of Chinese history generally agree that China's modern history started in 1912 when Sun Yat-Sen proclaimed China a republic and in 1920 tried to unify the country. After his death in 1925, his successor Chiang Kai-shek entered into a long war against the newly-formed Chinese Communist Party. By the end of World War II, China was economically exhausted, politically divided and militarily weak. Many observers relegated it to the status of a failed state.

In 1949 the Kuomintang under Chang Kai-shek was defeated by the Chinese Communist Party led by Mao Zedong and withdrew to Formosa, now known as Taiwan. Under Mao, the Communist Party established control over the entire Chinese mainland and embarked on a series of five-year plans of social and economic modernization and development. These plans were draconian and caused horrendous hardship, suffering, sacrifice and bloodshed.

Following the death of Chairman Mao in 1976, the new leaders of the Chinese Communist Party embarked on an ambitious and bold reform and modernization plan which encompassed the party, the state and the economy. By the nineteen nineties, China had resurrected itself like the mythical Phoenix, rising with great confidence to become one of the world's most important economic powerhouses. During this period, China's domestic national product grew at an average yearly rate

of more than 12%, lifting more than 150 million people out of abject poverty. On the political level, China succeeded in recuperating its sovereignty over Hong Kong from Britain in 1997 and Macao from Portugal in 1999.

By the year 2010, China had become one of the world's fastest growing economies. Several factors were behind this "economic miracle" most notably:

- Huge investment expenditure from domestic savings and foreign investments.
- Rapid rise in productivity driven by new technologies and training programs.
- Confucian-based work culture driven by excellence, discipline, diligence and competitiveness.

To maintain this gigantic economic growth and the rapid pace of its domestic socio-economic development, reviving the ancient Silk Road concept was an imperative. Firstly, it provided a continuation of China's historical experience in establishing economic and cultural relations with countries west of its borders. Much more important was China's vital need to ensure diversified and global export outlets for its products, its surplus capital and labor. Also, China had to ensure access to sources of raw materials, especially oil and gas. Finally, this expanding two directional flow of goods and services required a wide-spread protection and security regime. In their totality, these elements constitute the core of China's new Silk Road initiative, now called the BRI.

**“ Finally, this expanding two directional flow of goods and services required a wide-spread protection and security regime. In their totality, these elements constitute the core of China's new Silk Road initiative, now called the BRI. ”**

China's leadership has based its strategy upon a commitment to deal with other nations according to the new norms of fair-sharing of benefits, equitable cooperation and respect for other people's aspirations, and cultures.

Put in a nutshell, BRI is the logical consequence of China's revival. The quest for new markets and investment venues is a survival necessity and is imperative for China's continued economic development and growth. China's cross border expansion differs from their old imperialist tactics. Its leaders on numerous occasions have declared that their strategy is based on sharing and cooperation, rather than dominance and exploitation.

## 2. BRI AND CHINA'S GRAND STRATEGY<sup>1</sup>

BRI itself, and Syria's participation in it, are referred to as acts of "Grand Strategy" to distinguish them from the more familiar themes of strategy that involve military operations and the use of state resources to achieve the purpose of war. "Grand Strategy" is different and more comprehensive. The Oxford Dictionary defines "Grand Strategy" as 'the highest level of national state craft that establishes how states or other political entities prioritize and mobilize military, diplomatic, economic, political and other sources of power to ensure what they perceive as their national interest'. The three distinguishing features of Grand Strategy are, its long-term scope, its holistic power content that embraces all resources of a state and its requirement to prioritize national interests and mobilize national resources to advance a state's most important goals.

The Chinese leadership perceives the BRI as a revival and continuation of the ancient Silk Road that connected Asia and Europe for centuries. Before embarking on an examination of BRI's scope and aims, it is necessary to place it in the historical context of China's ancient overland trade routes. The old and new silk roads differ from one another in nature, purpose, and geographic reach yet they share their respective scopes, exchange of goods and ideas, connectivity among different people and cooperation necessary to maintain unhindered flows and passage.

### 2.1 THE ANCIENT SILK ROAD

The German geographer and explorer, Ferdinand von Richthofen, first coined the term Silk Road or

*Seidenstrasse* in his book published in 1877<sup>2</sup>. He travelled along the old routes, traced their course and described the cities they served. His pupil, the Swedish geographer, explorer and cartographer, Sven Hedin, furthered von Richthofen's discovery with eye-witness accounts supported by maps in his book, *The Silk Road*, published in 1938.

China's ancient Silk Road was not a single road, but a network of trade routes and sea-lanes with many feeder tributaries. This connected China with the outside world, extended over a distance of 4700 kilometers and covered a wide geographic expanse. Dating back to the first century BC, these routes were used continuously by traders, nomadic tribes, religious missionaries, explorers, diplomatic emissaries, and invading armies. The Silk Road was the ancient world's most important trade highway, linking China, through Asia, to the Middle East, and therefrom to Europe and Africa. Some of the most important cities of antiquity owe their existence, growth, and prosperity to the traffic that moved along it. In addition to linking East and West in commerce, the Silk Road's contribution to the exchange of scientific knowledge, technologies, religion and cultural ideas was immense.

During, the Ming dynasty, in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, China embarked upon an ambitious maritime strategy to explore the world's oceans and seas. It built the largest fleet the world had ever known, consisting of hundreds of vessels designed for long-range navigation and seafaring. Admiral Zheng He, a Chinese Muslim slave, was appointed by Emperor Zhu Di as Commander in Chief of this navy and given the imperial order "to proceed all the way to the ends of earth to collect tribute from

1 For a brief Summary refer to Zhang Z., "The Belt and Road Initiative: China New Geopolitical Strategy" *SWP Working Paper*, Berlin: German Institute for International Affairs. 2-10-2019, P.4.

2 China, *Ergebnisse eigener Reisen und darauf gegründete Studien* (5 vols) 1877.

**“ The roads remained in constant use until 1453 when the Ottoman Empire disrupted trade with the West. In the 16th century, the decline of the Mongol Empire also reduced its viability, rendering the routes unsafe, whether because of government action or lack of protection for travelers. During Europe’s Age of Discoveries (15th Century to 17th Century), the exploration of safer, less obstructed though longer routes between West and East, rendered the old Silk Road network redundant. ”**

the Barbarians beyond the seas and unite the world in Confucian harmony”. Several historians have published evidence to show that the Chinese fleet reached America in 1421, seventy years before Columbus<sup>3</sup>. In 1432 China sent another huge fleet to the west of China, also under Admiral Zheng He. He sailed to South Asia, then to the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and to the Mediterranean Basin, Europe and North Africa<sup>4</sup>. Gavin Menzies’ two large volumes chronicle China’s naval exploits and describe its plans to expand its trade and influence on a worldwide basis. Its maritime strategy to create sea-lanes on a global scale was probably not as enduring as its overland routes, but it was as impressive and expansive.

The roads remained in constant use until 1453 when the Ottoman Empire disrupted trade with the West. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the decline of the Mongol Empire also reduced its viability, rendering the routes unsafe, whether because of government action or lack of protection for travelers. During Europe’s Age

of Discoveries (15<sup>th</sup> Century to 17<sup>th</sup> Century), the exploration of safer, less obstructed though longer routes between West and East, rendered the old Silk Road network redundant. A few sections survived until the collapse of the Safavid Empire of Iran in the early years of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

The influence of the Silk Road on the history of the world’s civilizations cannot be overstated. Peter Frankopan of Oxford University, in his encyclopedic book on China’s old Silk Road, praises its role in bringing together many diverse civilizations and people.<sup>5</sup>

China’s endeavors to explore the world and establish relations with other people and civilizations for political influence, commercial benefit and conquest are therefore not new. The old Silk Road and the naval exploits described by Frankopan and Menzies testify to that. Hence, one can say that BRI is a continuation of China’s old Confucian vision of universal unity, but by new means and for modified if not totally different objectives.

## 2.2 THE DRAGON RISES

The decision by the Chinese Government to revive the idea of the old trading roads connecting China to Central Asia, the Middle East, Europe and Africa dates back to the Nineteen Nineties and is a direct descendent of the ancient Silk Road and China’s age-old trading experience. Since then, successive leaderships of the Chinese Communist Party have pursued this policy. As China’s phenomenal economic growth continued, the Government’s plans for new trade routes gained momentum and had reached an advanced stage when President Xi Jinping was elected as China’s leader in 2012.

China and the US have enjoyed close and strong economic ties since 1972. However, China’s rapid economic development and its plans to expand its economic and political influence worldwide have

3 Menzies G., 1421, *The Year China Discovered America*, New York: Harper, 2004, Chapter.

4 Menzies G., 1434 *The Year a Magnificent Chinese Fleet Sailed To Italy*, London: Harper 2008.

5 Frankopan P. *The Silk Road*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015.

been perceived by US foreign policy makers as a threat. The US has responded by repositioning its power in the Pacific region, a policy known as the “rebalancing strategy”

Although the decision to revive the old trade routes was well underway, the policy was first explicitly explained in an article dubbed “March West Strategy” published in 2012 by Prof. Wang Jisi, of Beijing University.<sup>6</sup> Prof. Wang advised the Chinese Government to redirect its focus from the Pacific region where the US has dominated since the end of World War II to regions west of its borders in Asia, the Middle East and Africa where a direct confrontation with the US was less likely. He argued that a “marching west strategy” offers greater opportunities with lower risks. This was probably based on Chairman Mao’s famous strategy, “Where the enemy advances, we retreat. Where the enemy retreats we pursue”<sup>7</sup>.

**“ The entire project is expected to be complete by 2049. By 2040, it is estimated that it will augment the World’s GDP by over Seven Trillion US Dollars. ”**

China’s initial economic strategy was referred to as the “outgoing outdrive” to encourage Chinese firms to invest in foreign countries. This has been subsequently expanded into an all-round global economic development plan. President Xi Jinping, during an official visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013, introduced China’s new economic strategy to revive the ancient Silk Road, both overland and by sea, naming it the “One Belt one Road” initiative, a shortened form of the “Silk Road Economic Belt”. The term “belt” was used to describe China’s plans

**“ The two proposals of overland and maritime routes are now referred to as the “Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This Grand Strategy was officially incorporated into the Constitution of the Republic of China in 2017 and was described as a “bid to enhance regional connectivity and a brighter future”. By including BRI in its constitution, China confirmed its long-term commitment to the development of infrastructures and facilities jointly with Asia, Europe and Africa. ”**

to invest in a vast network of land and sea routes to connect it, via Central Asia, with regions west of its borders. A month later, on October 7, 2013, during his visit to Indonesia, he introduced a plan to promote maritime commerce which he referred to as the “21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road”. The two proposals of overland and maritime routes are now referred to as the “Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This Grand Strategy was officially incorporated into the Constitution of the Republic of China in 2017 and was described as a “bid to enhance regional connectivity and a brighter future”. By including BRI in its constitution, China confirmed its long-term commitment to the development of infrastructures and facilities jointly with Asia, Europe and Africa. The main purpose was to promote economic growth, prosperity and cultural exchange for all participants. The entire project is expected to be complete by 2049. By 2040, it is estimated that it will augment the World’s GDP by over Seven Trillion US Dollars.

In the span of ten years, China’s rise from a poor and developing country to become one of the world’s most important economic and political powers has been spectacular. Its BRI is driven not only

<sup>6</sup> Sun Yun, March West: “China’s response to US ‘Rebalancing’” Brookings, January 31, 2013. Wang’s article was published by the China’s Global Times in October 2012. (<https://globaltimes.cn>).

<sup>7</sup> Sun Yun, *Ibid.* P.1.



by China's historical experience in long-distance trade via the old Silk Road network, but also by its need to sustain its fast economic growth, especially the development of its domestic economy. Viewed from this perspective, it becomes clear that China needs stable and growing economic relations with its partners in this initiative just as much as the partners need China's support and investment. This mutual need gives credence to China's innovative approach to international cooperation and relations.

**“ Syria, Lebanon and Iraq are three Middle Eastern countries with the geographic location and resources that qualify them to play a crucial role in joining China's BRI. ”**

Today, China's BRI occupies center stage in its global international politics and economics. Its strategy to foster rapid economic development at home and promote equitable political relations and mutually beneficial human interactions abroad are recognized internationally. During the past decade, more than 150 countries constituting 80% of the members of the United Nations have joined its BRI in one form or another. Nonetheless, the BRI is not without problems and obstacles. There is an inevitable learning curve involving mistakes, delays and costs. Also, the project faces opposition from powers perceiving it as a potential threat to their influence. Already states like the US, Japan and Australia are advancing plans to counter China's BRI. They warn that it is “a debt trap” for developing countries, “deceptive expansionism” and “disguised exploitation”. Despite the bad publicity, threats of sanctions and counterbalancing actions, the growth and reach of China's new dragon seems unstoppable. Some people make history, some try to stop it and others run after it, trying in vain to ride on its tail. In such contests, history teaches that only the makers of history win in the long run. Everyone else trails behind.

Syria, Lebanon and Iraq are three Middle Eastern countries with the geographic location and resources that qualify them to play a crucial role in joining China's BRI. Not only do they connect China's major land based “economic corridors” across the Middle East to the Mediterranean coast, but they also provide port facilities and transit hubs. Syria has already joined BRI. Iraq, having agreed to a rail link with Iran in the southern borders between Iraq and Iran, will eventually do the same. The roles of Syria and Iraq in the BRI are complementary. Acting together, they can open more opportunities and bring higher benefits to their people. The two countries could harmonize their plans and cooperate with China to foster a joint economic and political development plan that can create its own dynamic and sustainability.

Lebanon could reap untold benefits if it joins BRI along with Syria, but its leadership has neither the political will nor the ability to undertake such a task.<sup>8</sup> If Lebanese politicians, whether in power or opposition, fear US sanctions, it is not to safeguard the interests of the Lebanese state, but to avoid the US freezing their own bank accounts and sequestering personal wealth stashed in foreign countries. Anyone who believes otherwise is naive. Hence, they improvise sound bites such as “self-distancing and neutrality” and present them as policy.

**“ Syria has already joined BRI. Iraq, having agreed to a rail link with Iran in the southern borders between Iraq and Iran, will eventually do the same. ”**

Peter Frankopan in his second book “The New Silk Road” examines and explains China's economic and geostrategic policies and provides an in-depth analysis of its growing role as a rising great world power. He sums-up his argument by a simple yet

8 The oil and gas project in South Lebanon is one example of Lebanese policy making.

telling prognosis that “All roads used to lead to Rome. Today they lead to Beijing”.<sup>9</sup>

## 2.3 BRI'S AIMS, SCOPE AND REACH

Based on a set of guiding principles, China has opted for a long-term strategy of economic and political development, both at home and abroad. Internally, its planning is directed towards safeguarding the unity and security of the state and maintaining a rapid growth rate of modernization and a regionally balanced economic development. Externally, the three guiding foundations of its planning are:

1. apolitical economic development through partnerships.
2. global geographic reach and connectivity.
3. security cooperation and benefit rather than coercion and hegemony.

China's BRI is often described as a “network of intercontinental trade routes and sea- lanes”. Closer scrutiny reveals that this is a globally integrated system of exchange, communications, information, and connectivity. Its size, extent and diversity have been made possible by China's spatial location, colossal demography, relentless economic development drive and the new technologies and scientific discoveries made in the last hundred years.

The economic and geostrategic implications of the BRI Memorandum of Understanding recently signed between China and Syria must be viewed against the backdrop of China's “grand strategy”<sup>10</sup> for global economic, political and security development. The reach, scope and rapid growth of China's BRI, one of the most important national operating plans, demonstrate the potency of this “Grand Strategy”

**“ The economic and geostrategic implications of the BRI Memorandum of Understanding recently signed between China and Syria must be viewed against the backdrop of China's “grand strategy” for global economic, political and security development. ”**

and its far-reaching influences on the “future of the world”. If BRI's structure is superimposed on a world map, its fundamental underpinning of economic partnerships, global reach, security and connectivity is graphically illustrated.

To appreciate the growing role of China in the world's emerging economic and political new world order, it is essential to examine BRI's four main characteristics, its geographic reach, physical structure, main objectives, and security components as follows:

### 2.3.1 GEOGRAPHIC REACH

BRI's geographic reach covers the continents, oceans and seas of the entire globe and encompasses regions which are diverse in spatial size, human and natural resources, cultures and levels of economic development. Its overland geographic reach covers Northern, Southern and Central Asia, in addition to the Middle East, Africa, Eastern and Western Europe. The BRI also extends to the South Pacific and parts of Central and Latin America. Though the USA is not officially a member of the Initiative, the value of the mutual economic interests between China and the US makes them close business partners and yet at the same time, adversaries. According to recent Chinese official statements, plans are already under way to establish a Nordic trade route connecting China with Europe via the Arctic region. Its other component, the “Maritime Initiative” covers, in addition to the Pacific and Indian Oceans, the Five Seas that include the Red, Mediterranean, Adriatic, Black and Caspian Seas.

<sup>9</sup> Frankopan P, *The New Silk Road*, London: Bloomsbury, 2018, Pp.89-108.

<sup>10</sup> The term “Grand Strategy” has a wider scope than “military strategy” because the latter focuses on military power for political ends, while the former, the highest form of statecraft, prioritizes, mobilizes and deploys national sources of power, be they economic, diplomatic, military and societal, to serve national interests and achieve the state's high policy objectives.

## 2.3.2 PHYSICAL STRUCTURE

China's Grand Strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is based essentially on its BRI. This "Grand Strategy" evolves continuously in tandem with other countries' developing socio-economic needs and capabilities. Since 2013, when it was formally launched by President Xi Jinping, its membership, investment outlays, geographic span and functional scope have grown at a phenomenal rate. This integrated system of trade routes, investment venues, connectivity networks, joint economic development programs and infrastructural complexes is a two-pronged initiative, one land-based, the other maritime.

The land-based initiative includes networks consisting of six trunk routes, or as they are referred to by Chinese officials, "economic corridors" linked by auxiliary feeder routes and by railways. They are supported by transit and warehousing hubs, bridges, power plants, fueling facilities and travel amenities<sup>11</sup>. The six overland routes referred to officially as "economic corridors" are as follows:

1. China-Russia-Mongolia Corridor.
2. China-New Eurasian land bridge.
3. China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor
4. China-Indochina Peninsula Corridor.
5. China-Pakistan Corridor.
6. China-Bangladesh-India-Myanmar corridor

The plans for the afore-mentioned Nordic economic corridor, the Polar Silk Road, to connect China with Europe via the Arctic are well underway.

China's Maritime Belt and Road Initiative is as ambitious and extensive as its land-based counterpart. It connects China's coastal regions with the South Pacific, South and Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, the Mediterranean Basin, Africa and Europe. More specifically, the maritime route system links major Chinese ports like Shanghai and Shenzhen to Hanoi, Jakarta, Colombo, Northern

India, the Maldives, Mombasa, East Africa and Djibouti on the Red Sea. It passes through the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean, the Adriatic Sea and Trieste in North Italy with its rail and port facilities providing further connections with Eastern and Central Europe, as well as with the Baltic States and Northern Europe. China's maritime plans include the Five Seas Strategy aimed at connecting the Black Sea, The Baltic Sea, the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf with a system of canals, ports, railroads and land routes. The totality of the initiatives described above, regardless of names, geographic locations or structure, constitute integral components of China's national long-term strategy for economic and political development. These land routes and sea-lanes must be understood as complementary to one another and interdependent.

## 2.3.3 PRINCIPAL AIMS

The following summarizes a select number of statements outlining China's vision of BRI's ends and means<sup>12</sup>. President Xi Jinping's statement in this respect is both, concise and precise. He says,

**"China will actively promote international cooperation, through the Belt and Road Initiative. In doing so we hope to achieve policy, infrastructure, trade, financial and people-to-people connectivity and thus build a new platform for international cooperation, to create drivers of shared development<sup>13</sup>."**

President Xi Jinping's statement has been elaborated and explained in detail by several Chinese state agencies to emphasize partnership, connectivity, and shared benefit as prime objectives. In 2020, Xinhua, the official Chinese news agency published a position paper outlining in detail BRI's goals and meaning. The aim of BRI was described as follows:

11 ROC State Council Information Office, "What Are the Six Economic Corridors Under Belt and Road Initiative, China's Facts, Beijing, August 4, 2020.

12 China's National Development and Reform Commission, "Vision and Action on Jointly Building the Belt and Road Initiative" Beijing: 2020.

13 OECD, "China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Global Trade, Investment and Finance Landscape" Business and Finance Outlook, Paris: 2018, Paris, Chapter 2.



**“a transcontinental network to facilitate trade and investments and promote development among all countries involved. At the same time BRI aims to ensure all parties gain real benefits by sharing those benefits. The term “sharing benefits” means that the interests and concerns of partners are taken into consideration. It also means seeking convergence of interests with other countries and expansion of “common good” to ensure a fair distribution of benefits. Related goals include “improving the life of people living along BRI, facilitating the transfer of scientific and technological innovations between partners and promoting green development.”<sup>14</sup>**

China intends to achieve a number of specific strategic aims through BRI, of which the most important are bypassing the straits of Malacca, securing its own lengthy borders, finding markets for its products and sources of raw materials for its state-owned companies, aligning the economic development plans of its partners with its own, and furthering its foreign policy without resorting to intervention.

It is useful to summarize the more important strategic ends as follows:

- Forming multilateral and bilateral partnerships on a world-wide basis
- Financing infrastructural and other development programs at affordable cost.
- Providing partners with Chinese knowhow, labor and management skills.
- Fostering regional cooperation platforms and banking institutions.
- Promoting policy coordination, connectivity, unimpeded international exchange as well as, economic and financial integration.

BRI suggests that China's approach to economic and political international relations is dramatically different from the familiar Western models,

including Russia's. Its innovative approach to international relations lies in its regional cooperative and benefit-sharing endeavors. Nevertheless, China it is not a charity. Serving and promoting its core national interests remain its priority. Its Grand Strategy through BRI emanates from its national needs, and from its Confucian world outlook of universal unity and harmony.

### 2.3.4 POLITICAL AND SECURITY DIMENSIONS

In 1999, China announced its new Grand Strategy for economic growth and expansion through BRI. In 2013, President Xi Jinping formally launched BRI. Government agencies described it as an “apolitical economic and investment project” Its security component was neither denied nor ignored but remained in the background, suggesting that it was not a pressing priority. The logic behind this approach lies in China's reluctance to arouse fears among its competitors, to assure its partners that BRI is essentially concerned with economic development rather than political gain and to present BRI as a benign expansion partnership rather than domination.

National security has always occupied a prime position in the agenda of the Chinese Government and the Communist Party. It rose to the forefront in the late 1990s and was quickly referenced by government officials and academics as the BRI gained momentum. Although the Chinese Government still maintains the position that BRI is apolitical, it now places greater emphasis on the BRI's security component as an integral part of its security strategy. As the BRI expands in area and scope, the challenges and potential threats to China's national security become more critical and compel China to take measures to safeguard its overseas national interests.

BRI has already been perceived as a threat by other states, notably the US, Australia and India who are trying to counterbalance China's initiative. Such patterns of action and counter action usually bring

<sup>14</sup> China Information Service, “Silk Road Data Base, Aims”, Xinhua News Agency, Beijing; Jan 2020, <https://en.imsilk-road.com>.

the familiar international security dilemma into play. China wants to avoid that. The USA, under President Trump, openly regarded China as a threat. Japan, in 2015, presented a plan entitled Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure. The US, India, Australia and Britain met recently to review their plan “Asia-Africa Growth Corridor” launched in 2017. All these measures are to counter-balance China’s BRI. Even Russia, an ally of China, has announced its own initiative, the Greater Eurasia Economic Corridor.

Foreign policy planners in Beijing understand that expansion of the BRI signifies an extension and shifting of China’s “security boundaries” beyond its national borders. They are aware that “often the extension of a country’s security boundaries creates threats to others the same way that extension of territorial boundaries does.” Hence, their repeated assurances that the Chinese paradigm for achieving global influence is through a regional framework of cooperation, unlike the American model which is organically “global” and hegemonic <sup>15</sup>.

China’s “Position Paper on the New Security Concept” rejects the Cold War rationale on national security and outlines a “new concept featuring dialogue and cooperation”. It suggests that nations should “rise above one-sided security and seek common security through mutually beneficial cooperation” <sup>16</sup>. Fostering regional economic and investment partnerships is one component of China’s grand strategy. The other component is active “political and diplomatic presence and participation” to obtain firsthand information and to ensure that its plans are unobstructed.

China regards its position as a major player on the global scene as irreversible. Maintaining the momentum of its rapid economic growth, geographic expansion and access to sources of raw material, especially energy is a survival imperative.

<sup>17</sup> China has now become a formidable competitor, not only in marketing its rapidly increasing industrial production and surplus capital, but also in the raw material and energy markets for “fueling its economic growth”.

In a recent policy statement, “Vision for Maritime Cooperation Under the Belt and Road Initiative”, the Chinese government signaled that BRI’s aims include important strategic and security objectives in addition to the familiar economic and connectivity goals<sup>18</sup>. One of its main security concerns is to protect the extensive land borders that it shares with fifteen states including Russia. China considers BRI crucial to its border defense strategy because it facilitates “periphery diplomacy” by forming close economic and political partnerships with states along its Asian borders.

China’s national security strategy and goals have changed in pace with its evolving needs, capabilities and experiences. During the past five decades, China has successfully transformed itself from a closed country into a leading participant in the world’s economy and international politics. This has critical security implications for China as well as for other states, be they friends or foes. For example, the success of China’s BRI has been beneficial to China’s national wellbeing, “making its national security at once, stronger and yet more vulnerable”<sup>19</sup>. Its success compels China to keep “moving forward or its economic productive force could turn into a destructive force that leads to chaos and even violent civil unrest”<sup>20</sup>.

The rapid progress of BRI has caused a dramatic shift in the focus of China’s national security from one of domestic defense and development to that

15 Wenmu Z. *Sea Power and China’s Strategic Choices*, *China Security*, WSI: Beijing, 2006, P.20.

16 China Info Service, ‘Position Paper on the New Security Concept’, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn>.

17 National Development and Reform Commission, “China to Become the Second largest Energy Consumer in the World” November 4, 2004, <https://news.xinhuanet.cn>.

18 State Council Information Services, “Vision for Maritime Cooperation Under the Belt and Road Initiative”, 2017, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn>.

19 Wenmu Z “Sea Power and China’s Strategic choices”, *op. cit.* P.17.

20 *Ibid.* P.18.

**“ The main features and aims of China’s BRI highlight the opportunities and risks it carries for Syria’s reconstruction, economic development and national security. For the first time in its modern history, Syria can have in China a reliable partner and ally who does not seek dominance, pursue one-sided benefits or exploit the country solely for its own national gains. ”**

of global geographic and economic reach. Access to global markets is now a survival imperative for China and its security boundaries have been extended to include its core national interests worldwide. Protecting and defending those interests are basic functions of statecraft. The question is how will China respond to its future security needs and what strategies will it deploy?

China’s security policies are flexible, continuously evolving in their basic principles but remain practically unchanged. China’s vision for a new security concept, presented in 1996, focused on the improvement of dialogue as the best means of “prompting security through cooperation”. Several subsequent “position papers” outline and explain its concept and policy of national security. Its latest position paper on security summarizes China’s vision of the goals, guiding principles, and policies of international security <sup>21</sup>. China’s “new security concept” is based on the premise that the world is one of diversity, consisting of states with different interests, aspirations and cultures. Yet they are interdependent, rendering collective security a survival imperative. It adds that ‘security for all’ is achievable by economic cooperation,

peaceful conflict resolution, promotion of regional organizations and combating “other security threats” like poverty, terrorism and organized crime.

China regards global economic cooperation and development as the best way to pursue, peace and prosperity, not only for countries with similar political outlooks, ideologies and governance systems but also for countries that differ. Against the backdrop of this security concept, BRI stands out as a key component of China’s national security policy and generates its own specific security goals as follows:

- Maintain open access to the world markets for trade and investments.
- Ensure an unobstructed flow of raw materials into China
- Secure for China sources of raw materials, especially energy.
- Create alternative trade routes to ensure the free flow of China’s trade in case of sanctions or embargos.
- Form regional economic partnerships and political alliances to protect China’s investments, expatriate labor and trade routes, both overland and maritime.

The main features and aims of China’s BRI highlight the opportunities and risks it carries for Syria’s reconstruction, economic development and national security. For the first time in its modern history, Syria can have in China a reliable partner and ally who does not seek dominance, pursue one-sided benefits or exploit the country solely for its own national gains.

Syria, in partnership with China, could rebuild its national economy and national security. It could also act as a linchpin for establishing, together with China, several regional cooperative institutions. This translates into the development of lasting and solid economic and political relationships. Equitably shared benefits, mutual confidence and above all reliability are of the essence.

21 See “China’s Position Paper on the New Security Concept”, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn>.

### 3. BRI AND SYRIA'S GRAND STRATEGY

BRI's aims and economics encompass the entire resources of the Chinese state. So too do the reconstruction and national security needs of Syria whose economy and infrastructure have been destroyed by a ten-year long war. To rebuild itself, Syria must mobilize and deploy all its material and human resources for years to come. This demands the development of a "Grand Strategy" which prioritizes national objectives and directs its entire resources accordingly to advance these objectives. Moreover, the long-term nature of such a strategy necessitates domestic stability and reliable external relationships.

China and Syria had already established economic relationships before President Assad's visit to Beijing in 2004. During that visit, several important cooperation agreements were concluded, giving that relationship a greater momentum and wider scope. In a policy speech in 2005, after his return from his visit to China, President Assad announced, "it is time for Syria to look East because this where the future lies." He reiterated these words almost verbatim on March 17, 2022 in Damascus, while addressing the Syrian Teachers' Conference.

In 2005, President Assad outlined his "Four Seas Initiative" to make Syria a nexus of international trade, especially for the energy sector. Syria's geographic centrality positioned it to connect the Mediterranean, Caspian Sea, Black Sea and the Persian Gulf by forming a partnership with Turkey, Iran and Iraq. This project included energy pipelines, railways, and land and water corridors.

China and Syria maintained high-level diplomatic contacts to explore means of close cooperation. The Syrian coast was the only base available for China in the Eastern Mediterranean because other possible alternatives in Lebanon, Israel and

**“ In a policy speech in 2005, after his return from his visit to China, President Assad announced, “it is time for Syria to look East because this where the future lies.” He reiterated these words almost verbatim on March 17, 2022 in Damascus, while addressing the Syrian Teachers’ Conference. ”**

Turkey were blocked by the US. Syria's plans to connect with China to further its own economic development and to diversify its political and security relationships were well-advanced before the war began in 2011. In hindsight, it may be that the real aim of the war on Syria was firstly to thwart Assad's Four Seas Initiative. After that, it was to prevent Syria from developing its relationship with China, impede China's access to the Mediterranean and break Syria's ties to Iran. According to Miles Copeland, regime change is one of the cheapest means to achieve such ends.<sup>22</sup>

In an interview with China's Phoenix Television in 2020 in Damascus, President Assad explained Syria's policy by saying:

**“China is assisting us in reconstruction and in humanitarian aid. We welcome these companies to start looking into and studying the Syrian market which is improving quickly and constantly in terms of security. It is essential that we start discussing investment opportunities because it is**

22 See Copeland, Miles, *The Game of Nations*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969 Chapter 3.

well-known that rebuilding countries destroyed partially or totally by war is very profitable and has high return on investment. Support from China and other friendly countries in Syria's reconstruction is as important as the military efforts in restoring stability and striking and fighting terrorism"<sup>23</sup>.

Although Syria's security concerns take precedence over all else, both Syria and China have kept them in the background, so as not to offend Russia or cause China embarrassment with the US. Examination of the declarations made reveals that the envisioned security of BRI and that of Syria are omnipresent and interlinked. Eventually they will be brought into the open and translated into strategies and operational security plans. China will need to protect its BRI and *pari passu* assist Syria in securing its territory.

In elaborating his country's policy in the Middle East, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi said,

**“due to protracted conflict and turmoil in the more recent history, the region has descended into a security low land. For the region to emerge from chaos and enjoy stability it must break free from the shadows of big-power geopolitical rivalry and independently explore development of paths suitable to regional realities. It must stay impervious to external pressure and interference and follow an exclusively reconciliatory approach to build a security architecture that accommodates the legitimate concerns of all sides”<sup>24</sup>.**

China's foreign policy calls for building regional cooperation with regimes, not only to promote economic development but also to ensure the political stability and security necessary for the advancement of its BRI. Both its structure and goals mandate security cooperation among its members

**“ China's foreign policy calls for building regional cooperation with regimes, not only to promote economic development but also to ensure the political stability and security necessary for the advancement of its BRI. ”**

as much as economic cooperation. China and Syria are cognizant of the importance of security as one of the essential requisites of their cooperation but have not yet announced how to implement it.

### 3.1 EARLY OVERTURES

The ancient Silk Road linked China to Europe through Central Asia and the Middle East. Syria's association with these trade routes runs deep in its history. For more than 1500 years, the prosperity and growth of cities like Aleppo, Palmyra, and Damascus testify to Syria's role as an integral part of the old Silk Road and one of its key connection hubs.

Building on its historical role and geographic location, Syria sees itself as the natural heir of that tradition and is keen to become an active participant in BRI. China's revival of the Silk Road concept provides Syria with great opportunities which are crucial to its economy and security. By joining BRI, Syria seeks China's economic assistance in its reconstruction program and at the same its support to rebuild its national security. China needs Syria for overland passage and port facilities. This interdependence is described in an article published by “China Daily Global Edition” on December 19, 2019 headed, “The BRI need Syria just as Syria needs it”.

Though both countries recognize their strong mutual interests, they have moved forward slowly and cautiously. Syria had been more forthcoming than China because of the pressing economic and security demands of the war waged against

23 Middle East Institute, February 10, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu>.

24 Asia Times, China, April 4, 2021, <https://asiatimes.com>.



it. China, for its part, had been at the very early stages of launching its BRI and was still testing the grounds closer to its territorial boundaries.

**“ Syria’s prevailing experience with western powers has been a continuation of the Sykes-Picot arrangement of 1916 based on a policy of “divide and rule” for the purposes of exploitation and hegemony. ”**

BRI is a national priority and China has calculated its moves carefully to ensure it succeeds. According to Wenmu Z, “maintaining China’s economic Juggernaut not only requires continuing participation in global markets but also depends on access to energy and other resources”<sup>25</sup>. Throughout this period China has maintained a low-key policy in Syria, avoiding direct involvement in its war, but at the same time refusing to relinquish its rapidly developing relationship.

Steps have been taken by both countries to lay the foundations of a wide-ranging economic and diplomatic connectivity. China has always supported Syria in the UN Security Council by vetoing resolutions proposed by the US and its allies to sanction and isolate Syria. Also, China has made substantial investments of more than US\$14.5 billion by 2019 in Syria’s economy. Trade between the two countries during the same period reached US\$ 1.3 billion with an average annual growth rate of 33%.<sup>26</sup>

Syria needs a reliable ally like China, a rising global power that can be depended upon to build a fair and mutually beneficial long-term relationship. Syria’s prevailing experience with western powers has

been a continuation of the Sykes-Picot arrangement of 1916 based on a policy of “divide and rule” for the purposes of exploitation and hegemony. Since 1920, Syria has been under constant attack by the West, mostly by covert intervention but also by open war. For the first time, Syria is breaking free from the European power loop and is moving East. President Assad in a televised address on March 17, 2022, to a Conference of Syria’s Teachers emphasized the determination of Syria to “look East because the countries there have the means, and the true will to assist us.” He added, “I had made this proposal earlier and I repeat it today”.<sup>27</sup>

Historically China’s approach to Syrian politics

**“ For the first time, Syria is breaking free from the European power loop and is moving East. ”**

has been balanced and fair. During the last twenty years, China has displayed no hegemonic interest and has not sought exclusivity or special conditions for its relationship with Syria. Both countries have declared, jointly and individually, that their relationship is based on their similar outlook to international politics, their mutual trust in one another and an enduring reliable partnership. President Assad regards Syria’s joining BRI as inevitable saying, “I think when the infrastructure is developed, the Silk Road passing through Syria becomes a forgone conclusion because Syria is more than a road drawn on a map.”<sup>28</sup> In this respect he is referring to Syria’s Four Seas Strategy as a continuation of China’s Five Seas initiative outlined in its Maritime BRI.

The importance of joining the BRI to Syria becomes clearer once viewed in the context of the close

<sup>25</sup> Wenmu Z, China’s Security, *Op. Cit.* P.18.

<sup>26</sup> Global Times, China, <https://globaltimes.cn/china/page/202112>.

<sup>27</sup> President Assad B, “Address to Syria’s Teachers Conference”, *Syrian Television*, March 17. 2022.

<sup>28</sup> China Information Service. *Silk Road Briefing*, <https://silk-roadbriefing.Com/news>. P.1.

**“ Syria’s centrality at the crossroads of Asia, Europe and Africa, and its position on the Eastern Mediterranean coast, endow it with significant strategic value. Its nonaligned international politics renders it a reliable partner and its strategic vulnerabilities motivate it to seek a powerful and trustworthy ally. ”**

interactive relationship between its geographic location, political orientation and security policies. Syria’s centrality at the crossroads of Asia, Europe and Africa, and its position on the Eastern Mediterranean coast, endow it with significant strategic value. Its nonaligned international politics renders it a reliable partner and its strategic vulnerabilities motivate it to seek a powerful and trustworthy ally.

Geography has always been a crucial determinant of Syria’s political history. Syria has been one of the world’s main fields upon which the Game of Nations has been played<sup>29</sup>. While geography has provoked the field of play, the resilience and deeply rooted solidity of its people have been the dynamo that has transformed Syrian politics from a concept into an action for survival and continuity.

The leadership of Syria, under President Bashar Al Assad, understands the lessons of the country’s history and its political geography, especially the opportunities and risks of geographic centrality and the covetous policies of the old European colonial powers and the USA. China is an exception. It has no colonial history in the Middle East and has never sponsored Syria’s adversaries. Zhou Rong, Senior Fellow in Chongyang Institute for Financial

Studies at Renmin University of China, explained the Chinese position in the Middle East saying<sup>30</sup>,

**“China is not geographically near the Middle East, nor does it foster political partners in the region, China only tries to seek equal cooperation and mutual development with all Mideast countries. China is a more friendly and trustworthy country to all the Middle East countries compared to the US. China has no enemies in the region, does not want to seek monopoly and does not attach any additional conditions to its cooperation. The US usually has its own strategic desires behind its moves in the region”**

The four-day visit of President Assad to Beijing in 2004 was intended to lay the foundations of a “closer economic and diplomatic relationship with China ”.<sup>31</sup> It was the first visit of a Syrian President to China since the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1956. He met China’s then President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao. Several cooperation agreements were signed covering education, agriculture, health, technology, irrigation, energy, industry, trade and investments. China’s Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing described the visit as “a great event in the process of Chinese-Syrian relations.”<sup>32</sup>

After his return from China, President Assad and his team started to develop Syria’s “Four Seas Strategy”. He unveiled it in Turkey in 2009 saying:

**“Once the economic space between Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran becomes integrated, we would link the Mediterranean, Caspian, the Black Sea and the Persian Gulf. We are not just an important part of the Middle East but also, we are an essential actor. Once we link these four seas together, we become the compulsory intersection of the world trade and investment.**

29 See Copeland Miles, *The Game Of Nations*, New York: Simon Schuster, 1969. Chapters 1-3. He participated in and was instrumental in planning Syria’s first military coup by Husny Az Za’im in 1949.

30 Rong Z, “Interview with China’s Global times”, January 13, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/china>.

31 SANA, Syria’s News Agency, June 15, 2004.

32 SANA, Syria’s Official News Agency, June 7, 2004.

**The aim of the four seas initiative is to transform Syria into a nexus of investments, energy and trade and a node of economic interaction among neighboring countries.”<sup>33</sup>**

Syria’s Four Seas initiative is complementary to China’s Maritime Silk Roads and falls within the scope of its Five Seas initiative. This provides Syria “with a unique interconnected energy and trade hub and the opportunity to develop Latakia into one of the most important ports on the Eastern Mediterranean with a linkage to the Red Sea and Africa”<sup>34</sup>. Syria’s centrality provides BRI with an overland access to Jordan, Lebanon, Arabia and Iraq and from Iraq to Iran and beyond.

In December 2009, Syria’s Foreign Minister Walid Muallem prefaced his address to the Syrian Parliament on China’s policy saying,

**“Syria seeks strategic and economic relations with China. These strategic ties include the Four Seas Plan. They are intended to form a nucleus that will soon be augmented by Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. When done, Syria becomes a transit hub and an access point for countries in Europe wishing to enter Arab and West Asian markets.”<sup>35</sup>**

As indicated previously, there is increasing evidence to suggest that the real aims of the war on Syria was to destroy the Syrian state before it went any further with its China policy. Few believed that Syria would withstand the onslaught from the US, Israel, Western Europe, Turkey and Arab puppet regimes, or that the Syrian state would survive. If the immediate cause of the war on Syria was to force it to abandon its alliance with Iran and

succumb to the machinations of the Gulf States and Turkey, the longer-term cause was to prevent the extension of BRI from Iran via Iraq to Syria.

The result of the war can be summed up in one word, failure. It may have caused mayhem, deliberately so, but the law of unintended consequences reigns supreme. For the first time in history, Russia acquired its long wished-for foothold in the Mediterranean. Neither the wars with Israel, nor the might of the Soviets achieved that. America’s misguided policy succeeded in realizing this where all other efforts by the Russians had failed.

Projection of power, especially when over long distances and extended periods of time, is subject to the laws of diminishing marginal returns. It becomes highly corrosive if used to achieve cheap victories for politicians and their generals and to empower what President Eisenhower later named the “military industrial complex”.<sup>36</sup> This should not be taken lightly because the Mediterranean basin will soon be transformed from a Western dominated region to one which is divided among the competing Great Powers with disastrous consequences to its littoral states.

## 3.2 SYRIA JOINS BRI

In an interview with China’s Phoenix Television on December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2019 in Damascus, President Bashar Al Assad announced Syria’s readiness to join the BRI, saying, “Syria aspires to join BRI and together with China develop Syria’s economy and infrastructure”. The international environment was volatile. Changes in the regional and global balances of power were drastic. These factors notwithstanding, Syria formally joined BRI on January 12<sup>th</sup> 2022 by signing, in Damascus, a Memorandum of Understanding with China.

This historic event had been preceded by a series of visits and high-level contacts between officials

33 “Syria’s Four Sea Policy and the Middle East Quartet”, *Brooks Foreign Policy Review*, Washington DC. Brooks Institution: October 12, 2020.

34 Devonshire Ellis “Can China Reposition Syria with the Five Seas Strategy, <https://www.dezchina.com>, July 21, 2021.

35 ‘Syria to Become Hub Among Four Seas’, Middle East Weekly Report, August 1, 2009. Also see Lin C.’ China’s Strategy Shifts Towards the Region of the Four Seas, ISPSW, Strategic Series, Issue.226. April 2013, <https://www.files.ethz.ch>.

36 Sun Tzu, 4000 years ago noted this law and von Clausewitz described it as “a culminating point.”



of both countries. Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, visited Damascus on July 17<sup>th</sup> 2021, two months after President Assad's re-election. During his four-day stay, he had intensive meetings with several Syrian ministers and senior governmental officials. After meeting President Assad, he told China's news agency Xinhua,

**“the Syrian Government's leading role in fighting terrorism on its soil should be respected and Syria's sacrifices and contribution to the anti-terror fight should be acknowledged. Schemes of provoking ethnic divisions under the pretense of counter terrorism should be opposed”<sup>37</sup>.**

Within less than two months, on August 14<sup>th</sup> 2021, Miss Buthaina Shaaban, senior advisor to President Assad, visited China with messages to the Chinese leadership. On November 5<sup>th</sup> 2021, the Presidents of China and Syria had a three-hour telephone meeting during which they agreed to upgrade their cooperation and develop their common economic and strategic interests. President Jinping told President Assad that

**“China attaches great importance to the development of Syrian-Chinese relationships and both countries should join efforts to defend international equity and justice and safeguard the interests of developing countries”,** adding that both countries would work together to achieve more results in **“bilateral friendly cooperation”<sup>38</sup>.**

Yin Gang, a researcher at the Chinese West Asian and African Institute commenting on Syria's formal participation in BRI said

**“the major task for the Syrian Government was to safeguard its national security. Now it has entered a stage of reconstruction and**

**its decision to sign the Memorandum of Understanding with China at this time shows its sincerity and huge political trust in China. The Chinese Government always showed support to the Syrian Government during its war which also lays a good political basis for the two sides' cooperation under BRI”<sup>39</sup>**

Syria's joining China's BRI was strategically timely. It was carefully planned and tested by both parties over a period of more than fifteen years. Its timing coincided with Syria prevailing against its adversaries, state and non-state, and after Syria's people and allies succeeded in preserving the state and its core existence.

Syria and China share mutual needs. China needs Syria's geographic assets and resources as much as Syria needs China's economic assistance and strategic support. Both need to build a reliable and enduring regional security regime, not only to protect Syria but, equally important, China's BRI.

China needs to secure its investments and trade routes through regional long-term alliances and Syria needs a strategic partner willing and able to help it rebuild its war-torn economy and national security apparatus. To survive in the ongoing game of global power politics, Syria must align itself with a rising great power. Given that Syria is the only reliable provider of port and access facilities to China, the latter is a trust-worthy ally because it harbors no historical hegemonic ambitions in Syria and has no alliances with Syria's adversaries, whether regional or international. Longevity and reliability, the main prerequisites for a balanced and fruitful relationship, were already in place when the two countries signed BRI's Memorandum of Understanding.

It has been noted earlier that the true objective of the war on Syria was not only to overthrow

37 Angi&Quingqing, “Chinese FM's visit to the Middle East”, Global Times, China, July 18 2021. Also refer to China's News Agency Xinhua, June 17, 2021.

38 Xinhua Chin's News Agency November 6 2021. Also Global Times of China November 7, 2021.

39 Gang Yin, ‘Syria Joins BRI Amid Extensive Chinese-Middle East Exchange’ Global Times, China, January 13, 2022, <https://global.times.cn/china>.

President Assad but, as part of the Great Powers' struggle for world dominance, to destroy the Syrian State. It is now evident that another principal aim of the war was to hinder the progress of BRI and the Chinese influence which must flow from this endeavor. The same might be said of the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and now Ukraine.

**“ The Syrian State proved that it could survive political adversity, connivance, terrorism, separatism and even what amounts to “Total War”. It is doubtful whether any other state in the Middle East, Israel included, would match Syria’s track record in this respect. ”**

The leadership of President Assad and the vital roles of Russia, Iran and other allies are undeniable in preventing the downfall of Syria as a state and its disintegration as a sovereign political entity. However, the unfailing support and will of its people to prevent the destruction of Syria should not be underestimated. They stood behind their state and showed themselves ready to accept great human and material sacrifices to protect it. The Syrians, as a people, have a long experience of fighting foreign intervention. Whether their resistance was against the Ottoman Turks or the French Mandate, their tenacity in upholding the sovereignty of their state regardless of the horrific price to pay, has served them well.

That Syria has survived what was, in effect, a world war is accepted even by its enemies. Those who waged war on Syria thought it would be a walkover. They did not understand what most Syrians are made of. Nor did they understand their history of resistance to foreign dominance. The Syrian State proved that it could survive political adversity, connivance, terrorism, separatism and even what amounts to “Total War”. It is doubtful whether

any other state in the Middle East, Israel included, would match Syria’s track record in this respect.

This is the backdrop against which Syria joined China’s BRI in 2022. The Syrian leadership is cognizant of the risks ahead but seems confident that Syria is now ready to enter into a long-term partnership with China. On several occasions, they have made clear that the expected benefits of a partnership with China outweigh the risks, whatever they may be. President Assad explained the initiative by saying:

**“these are not just roads on a map but a policy for Syria to play again a leading political and economic role that would be of benefit not only to Syria, but to the region as a whole”.**

In joining BRI as China’s partner, Syria has taken a huge stride. BRI’s expansiveness, financial commitment, interdependent nature and expected benefits ensure its longevity and reliability. Any “going back” is most unlikely. This is confirmed by the Chinese political scientist Zhang Wenmu who said,

**“the national objectives of China have locked into a development and expansion pattern from which there is no turning back, that is why maintaining the momentum of its economic juggernaut requires BRI’s continuity and its drive to participate in the worlds markets and to have access to raw material and energy sources”<sup>40</sup>.**

Despite being a late participant in the BRI, Syria’s efforts to develop close economic and strategic relationships with China are not recent. In fact, Syria’s interest in a security cooperation with China precedes its seeking military assistance from Russia by almost a decade. Officials from both countries met regularly in Damascus and Beijing

40 Wenmu Z., *Sea Power and China’s strategic Choices*, *China Security, Summer 2006*. Beijing: World Security Institute, 2006.

to discuss subjects of common security interests. In August 2016, Chinese Rear Admiral Guan Youfei pledged,

**“China will not only increase humanitarian aid to Syria but also military cooperation”<sup>41</sup>**

Still, Syria did not join the BRI until 2022. Four major reasons for this delay are obvious:

- a. The war on Syria and its uncertainties.
- b. US sanctions and possible consequences for Chinese companies operating in Syria.
- c. Sensitivities about the Russian military presence in Syria.
- d. Israel's offers to China of advanced US technologies, stopped later by the US.

Syria has calibrated its moves carefully given the pressure of war, economic sanctions and political isolation. Russia's assistance in its fight against Islamic terror was a survival necessity. The Syrian leadership accepts that Russia has its own goals in the region and its help will extend only as far as those goals are served. An alliance with China is mandatory because it provides Syria with a second option, perhaps even an alternative to Russia.

Syria today is between a rock and a hard place. Its security must take precedence over all else. Economic reconstruction is important but recent history shows that, without security, decades of economic development can be destroyed in months rather than years. BRI has been presented by China as a trade and investment initiative. Nonetheless, its global interactive and interdependent scope bring security to the forefront. Security is as important to China's BRI as it is to Syria.

The benefits of a complex and demanding project such as the BRI will not be immediate. It entails the uncertainties of management problems, training and

logistics, pitfalls to avoid and obstacles to overcome as well as the commitment of huge national resources. Despite all these difficulties, Syria has few options other than to move forward and will gain unprecedented opportunities to rise from more than a decade of a relentless war and destruction. The task is formidable but, together with the help of China, President Assad has more than an even chance of succeeding. This is not wishful thinking, but a plausible projection based upon China's economic and security interests in Syria and on its novel approach to international politics.

Syria, for the first time in its modern history, has engaged in a Grand Strategy with prioritized goals and realistic operational plans. Although rebuilding its infrastructure is an urgent necessity and developing its economy is of utmost importance, upgrading its security to ensure that it can defend its territory and protect its sovereignty must take precedence over everything else. For the first time, Syria is utilizing its strategic geographic location intelligently and purposefully. By joining the BRI, it is providing China with unbroken connectivity and access in return for China's participation and cooperation in developing the Syrian economy. According to Zhou Rong of Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies,

**“Syria's Participation in BRI means that the “initiative” no longer has blind spots in the Middle East, demonstrating its influence and appeal for the region”.<sup>42</sup>**

China is not a charity and, like other states, pursues its national interests as part of the normal practice of statecraft. Its BRI and foreign policy are not altruistic, but a means to sustain its economic growth and extend its global, diplomatic and political reach. For China, a continuous high rate of economic growth, unobstructed trade, security of its overseas investments and the build-up of its political and military prowess are survival

41 Liu Zhen, “Chinese Military to Provide Aid and Training to Syria”, *South China Morning Post*, Hong Kong: SCMP, August 16, 2016. <https://www.scmp.com>.

42 Rong Zhou, Asia News, Hong Kong, January 14, 2022. Also *Global Times*, Op cit. January 14, 2022.

imperatives. However, China's strategy differs from that of other great powers because its modus operandi is based on cooperation rather than coercion, and fair-sharing rather than exploitation.

In today's world of shifting structures and distribution of power, both China and Syria need to establish between them a reliable and sustainable long-term relationship. This will be examined and assessed below:

### 3.3 THE SUSTAINABILITY IMPERATIVE

Sustainability means the ability of a system to maintain itself at a certain rate and level over an extended period. It is achieved when that system's structure and goals "support one another to create a community of interests that are equitable, diverse and connected". In a world of rapid change and constantly shifting political power structures, sustainability in the relationships of states carries a high premium.

The nature, structure, operating strategy and objectives of China's BRI are such that its success is a direct function of its sustainability. In other words, BRI's survival is contingent on meeting its present targets without compromising its ability to project and maintain the momentum of its perpetual and steady progress into the future.

Interdependence and mutual benefits are two necessary consolidating factors in the evolving relationship between China and Syria. The more interdependent the relations, the more enduring and stable they are. The greater the mutual benefits, the firmer and more sustainable they become. This survival and development of such a symbiotic and synergistic relationship depends on long-term cooperation and mutual trust. The relationship between China and Syria through BRI is based upon their common interest in advancing it. China's successful economic growth strategy and the benefits that would accrue to Syria from its

participation in BRI extend over a long period of time and without adverse strings attached.

The political leaderships of China and Syria have expressed on more than occasion that their relationship is based on equitable cooperation, joint interest and mutual benefits. They have equally underlined BRI's long term and interdependent nature. The success of China's global national interest and strategy is critically contingent, not only on how far its BRI extends in space but also in time. Viewed from this perspective the longevity of BRI becomes mandatory and so too its security. The need for a sustainable and stable relationship between Syria and China cannot be overstated.

The passage of time inevitably provokes change. Likewise, national interests can alter over time. The tectonic shifts in the structure of global power are especially destabilizing in as volatile an area as the Middle East. However, interdependence and commonalities of interest, both supportive of sustainability, are potent mitigating factors. Once entrenched in the political and economic fabric of a country, they become more effective as a force of stability, reliability and trust. The guiding principles of BRI in Syria and the four "pillars" upon which its sustainability is founded are examined and explained below:

- Geopolitical Centrality that includes spatial access, connectivity, networking, and security regimes.
- Compatibility in national interests of both countries as explained later.
- Shared benefits from investments in economic development, creation of global markets and unobstructed access to sources of raw materials, especially energy.
- Regional national security and defense regimes to defend BRI's investments and assets in cooperation with local partners. These include border defense and protection of BRI's economic corridor networks.

### 3.3.1. COMPATIBLE NATIONAL INTERESTS<sup>43</sup>

A principal condition for building sustainable relationships between states is compatibility of their respective national goals and interests. It is almost impossible to find two states with identical national interests, but many have compatible or non-conflicting interests. Historically, China was never part of “the struggle for Syria” and, unlike the USA, Europe and even Russia, China harbored no interventionist or acquisitive plans for Syria. Its location far from the region and its focus on rebuilding its own domestic, political and socio-economic structures diverted it from the power struggle for the Middle East in general and Syria in particular. China is probably the only world power with a “clean political slate” on Syria and, as a consequence, relations between China and Syria have remained congenial.

China's Middle East foreign policy announced by Foreign Minister Wang Yi in 2021 is summarized as follows<sup>44</sup>:

- Non-interference in internal affairs and adherence to mutual respect.
- Equity and Justice to all.
- Non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.
- Collective security through regional dialogue.
- Accelerated economic development through co-operative initiatives like BRI.

Syria's experiences with Europe's great powers have been marred by fragmentation, controversy, deception, intervention and domination. After World War I, Syria's geographic unity was violated more than once by France and Britain and its people paid dearly for their country's subsequent

independence. Little has changed since. Syria is still under attack by the Western Powers. Its alliance with the Soviet Union was not better and, upon its collapse, Syria was left to its own fate for years.

In contrast, relationships between China and Syria do not exhibit any serious conflict of interest. Their outlook on international politics is not identical but neither is it contradictory or controversial. China is geographically distant from Syria and has never coveted Syrian territory or harbored any colonial plans to dominate it. Moreover, China was never involved in the policies of dividing and ruling Syria as the Western Powers have been and still are. Its record as a rising great power is impeccable and its policies towards Syria inspire confidence.

The relationship between China and Syria has evolved over almost two decades and has culminated in Syria's joining China's BRI. The goals, spatial scope and mode of investments of China's economic growth and expansion strategy, demand a long-term approach. This translates into an enduring relationship premised on mutual benefits, fair sharing, reliability and trust.

### 3.3.2 GEOPOLITICAL CENTRALITY

Syria's leadership grasped the value of Syria's geographic centrality and its relevance to its history. Two years before the war on Syria in 2011 and three years before China's President Xi Jinping officially disclosed the full extent of BRI in 2013, President Bashar Assad had announced Syria's Four Seas plan. He described this as part of his policy to open up the Syrian economy (*infatih*), which was partially true. A more careful reading into the scope and goals of the Four Seas initiative shows that it was based primarily on Syria's strategic location and its historical role in shaping the country's political geography.<sup>45</sup>

43 In this paper the term “*interest*” is used to describe gain of a political nature while the term “*benefit*” is used to describe profit of an economic or financial nature.

44 Foreign Minister Wang Yi, “A Five Point Initiative on Achieving Security and Stability in the Middle East”, Policies and Activities, Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Beijing, March, 2021.

45 Antoun Saadeh was among the first political leaders to recognize the importance of geography in determining the fate of nations. Unfortunately he was killed before he could develop his ideas further.



Geographic reach and access to unobstructed trade routes are crucial to BRI's success. Syria's location on the Eastern Mediterranean and on the crossroads of three continents endows it with a unique strategic character. This is as important and relevant today as it was several thousand years ago. A permanent element of Syria's geopolitical reality, it has, historically, been both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it enabled Syria to become a major trading hub and the melting pot of many civilizations which contributed to the richness of its cities and culture. On the other hand, it attracted conquerors, empire builders, soldiers of fortune and various other rogues who left chaos and devastation in their wake.

China's interest in Syria emanates from Syria's geographic location and its nonaligned foreign policy. Other candidates like Turkey, Israel and Egypt are too close to NATO and the US, while Lebanon is a failing state. Moreover, the Syrian State, despite a ten-year war and crushing domestic crises, has proved that it can still function and make its own foreign policy decisions.

Geography is the most important factor governing the Chinese-Syrian connection. It brought silk to Syria centuries ago and, for similar reasons, it is bringing the BRI. Political Geography might change but physical geography does not. What has remained of ancient Geographic Syria is a "core" that has proven in the last one hundred years almost impossible to divide.<sup>46</sup> For this reason, the geographic location of "core Syria" is as important today as it ever was. The difficulties involved in splitting an atom serves as an apt analogy.

The course charted by China to advance its BRI and the urgent need of Syria for economic growth and reconstruction lock both countries into a cooperation pact from which it will be difficult to retreat. On the strength of the evidence

available today, there are no noticeable conflicts or incongruities, whether economic, political or military. This is encapsulated in the title of the article quoted earlier, "the BRI needs Syria just as Syria needs BRI"<sup>47</sup>.

The two countries have a common interest in establishing lasting political and financial relations for the main reasons listed as follows:

- Neither country has conflicting regional relations.
- China's interest in Syria is not only as an important passage and "terminus hub" for BRI but also as a source of energy and raw materials.
- Syria's interest in China emanates from its desire to start its reconstruction plans as quickly as possible through BRI.
- Cooperation and benefit-sharing, the two most important principles of BRI make interdependence necessary. The greater the economic interdependence between China and Syria, the greater the political synergy and the more enduring their relations.

### 3.3.3 SHARED ECONOMIC BENEFITS

The success of BRI in Syria is vitally important to both countries because it is a key component of their grand strategies. BRI is intended to develop

**"trade, investment and infrastructure networks connecting China with other parts of the world along the ancient Silk Road trade routes and beyond."**<sup>48</sup>

Syria's central location enables China to create new "economic corridors" in the Middle East and link together the energy-rich littorals of the five seas; the Eastern Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, the Caspian and the Black Sea. Overland

<sup>46</sup> The core area phenomenon has been used often to explain how human communities coalesce into political entities and how they break up. See Taylor P.J. *Political Geography*, Harlow, UK, 1985, 16.

<sup>47</sup> China Daily, 19th December, 2019, [https:// www.global.chinadaily.com.cn](https://www.global.chinadaily.com.cn).

<sup>48</sup> China's News Agency, "China and Syria Sign MoU", Xinhua, January 13, 2022.

Syria provides links to Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Arabia and Turkey and thereafter to Europe.

Syria serves as a pivotal base for China to create regional economic, financial and political organizations (like ASEAN and CAREC) to promote and defend its BRI. This important component of China's BRI expansion strategy is explained below:

**“China aims to establish and strengthen partnerships among countries along the Belt and Road, set-up all-dimensional, multi-tiered and composite connectivity networks and realize diversified, independent, balanced and sustainable development in these countries.”<sup>49</sup>**

By 2004, China had signed several cooperation agreements with Syria and was already using the Port of Tartous and the free zone in Adra city as transit hubs for its trade to Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. Also, China was investing in the development of the energy industry in northeastern Syria.

The Syrian leadership, aware of the strategic value of its geographic location and its nodal role in the ancient Silk Road, decided, as far back as the year 2004, to look East towards China. Syria's motive to establish close relations with China were both geopolitical and economic. Since the war in 2011, its focus has shifted slightly to the latter, though security issues have always been on the agenda.<sup>50</sup>

Syria, unable to fight its war alone, sought military assistance from Russia but did not neglect its expanding relations with China. The Syrian Government sees a trustworthy and reliable friend in China and is keen to involve it in Syria's reconstruction and development programs. China is perceived as the best partner and ally Syria can have politically, militarily and economically.

**“ Syria's central location enables China to create new “economic corridors” in the Middle East and link together the energy-rich littorals of the five seas; the Eastern Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, the Caspian and the Black Sea. Overland Syria provides links to Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Arabia and Turkey and thereafter to Europe. ”**

China has established itself as Syria's largest trading partner. Exports to Syria amount to US \$51.3 billion and investments in the energy sector over US\$ 13 billion. China is the only country with the means and the will to make these large-scale and long-term investments, including nearly US\$ 200 billion, needed urgently for Syria's reconstruction. Syria needs Chinese capital, large-project management skills and human resources. China's experience in rapid infrastructure and economic development programs are invaluable to Syria's war-damaged economy.

In an interview in 2017, President Assad said,

**“relations with China were very good and will be on the rise because when a country like China is a friend that you can trust and rely upon, it is very natural to have relations at the people's level and at the formal level. China can participate in every sector, residential construction, infrastructures, industrial and agricultural projects”<sup>51</sup>.**

The benefits to Syria of joining BRI can be summarized as follows:

- Financing and participating in Syria's reconstruction and economic development projects.

49 Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Vision and Action on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Marine Silk Road”, Position Paper, Beijing: March 28, 2015.

50 This was discussed earlier as part of the Syria's late joining of BRI.

51 Interview, in Damascus, with Honk Kong based Phoenix Television on March 15, 2017.

- Assisting Syria in becoming a transit and trade hub and energy node.
- Participating financially and technically in the exploration and development of Syria's energy and mineral raw materials.
- Help Syria circumvent the economic sanctions imposed by the US and its allies.
- Support Syria to play an active regional role.
- Cooperate with Syria to bolster its defense capabilities.

### 3.3.4 COMMON THREATS AND SECURITY NEEDS

BRI was launched by President Xi Jinping as an “apolitical” economic, investment and trade initiative, yet its security component was neither disregarded nor concealed and is an integral element of Xi Jinping’s foreign policy to increase China’s influence in the neighborhood and beyond<sup>52</sup>. To emphasize its commitment to BRI’s continuity, both domestically and internationally, China has incorporated it into the Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party in 2017 and into the Constitution of the Republic of China in 2018 as “a core plan of action to be carried out long into the future”. Its official goals are stated as follows:

**“To promote the economic prosperity of countries along the Belt and Road Initiative, foster regional economic cooperation, strengthen exchanges and mutual learning between civilizations, and promote world peace and development”.**

In the last twenty years, **“China’s national security goals evolved from the need to protect its revolution and borders, to the need of securing BRI. This evolving need marks a full transformation from a closed country to a developing one that is irrevocably integrated with the rest of the world”.**<sup>53</sup>

China has achieved high economic growth and increased well-being in record time, making its national security stronger but also more vulnerable. As China develops BRI’s economic scope and extends its geographic reach, its “security boundaries” or the boundaries of its national interests move accordingly. In other words, its security boundaries move from its geographic political borders to include the boundaries of its expanding global interests. Defending the security boundaries of China’s national interests means the unification of its land, sea, and space powers with the powers of its regional partners.

The strategic shift of emphasis from defending the security of its “national borders” to safeguarding the “security boundaries” of its national interests mandates that China projects its power in tandem with its continuously expanding national interests. China’s leaders have always recognized that power projection is limited in time and space.

It is an established fact that projection of power over long distances and extended periods of time has been the main cause of the fall of all great powers.<sup>54</sup> To minimize the risk inherent in projecting its power to protect BRI, China has developed a doctrine of regional security based on the cooperation and participation of all BRI partners within a specific geographic area. The aim is to share the cost and spread the risk of BRI’s security among participants without overtaxing any individual one of them.

An official of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs summarized his country’s policy in this respect as follows:

**“We support regional countries in forming synergy, consolidating momentum of anti-terrorism and striving to restore regional stability. We also support countries in regions in exploiting a development path suited to**

52 Global China, “Mapping the Belt and Road Initiative”, MERCIC, Hong Kong: Global China Tracker, June 7, 2018.

53 Wenmu Z, “Sea Power and China’s Strategic choices”, China Security, summer 2006, Beijing: World Security Institute, 2006. P.17.

54 Kennedy P. The Rise and Fall of Great Powers, London: Harper Collins, 1987.



**them and we are ready to share governance experience and jointly build the Belt and Road and to promote peace and stability through common development.”<sup>55</sup>**

China's strategy to secure the continuity, expansion and safety of its BRI is two pronged: modernizing and expanding its military capabilities, as well as creating regional bilateral and multilateral security partnerships. BRI is China's principal vehicle of sustained economic growth and social development and is essential to improve the “well-being” of its citizens and ensure their support and loyalty. That alone makes the security of BRI a matter of national survival and its continued development and longevity are an integral part of China's national ideology and grand strategy. Although the BRI is structured regionally, it is functionally and operationally global with China as its super coordinator and even its “general manager”.

China's interest in Syria lies in its geographic centrality, and in its energy sources, import markets and huge investment opportunities. Additionally, the two countries share similar foreign policy goals and common interests in economic development. Syria, by joining BRI, has laid the foundations of a Grand Strategy with China which integrates its long-term plans for economic development with national security. Syria could not do that with the Western Powers or the Soviet Union. With today's Russia, the relationship is more military than holistic.

China and Syria's signature of BRI's Memorandum of Understanding confirms their common national interests and creates a long-term community of economic and security interests. The more their interdependence, the closer becomes their economic and security cooperation. Syria must defend its borders as much as China must defend the “security boundaries” of its national interests

**“ The outbreak of war in Ukraine and the international turmoil and confusion it is creating, has made Syria's joining BRI timely and critically vital. As the partnership develops and becomes institutionalized, the economic and security interests of China and Syria will become more interactive and interdependent. The scope and reach of BRI in Syria will advance and will be almost impossible to reverse. ”**

in Syria. The two countries are committed to this interdependent relationship and have a mutual interest in its success.

Syria has in China a world power that has a vested interest in its security and in helping it to mitigate US sanctions and the “Arab” boycott. Another area of mutual interest between Beijing and Damascus is the fight against terrorism. Groups of Uighurs, estimated at 5000 thousand strong, from China's Xinjiang province, have been joining ISIS in Syria since 2014 and have been infiltrated into Syria by Turkish and western intelligence agencies. These groups will pose a threat to China's security upon their return. China has therefore a direct interest in receiving intelligence from Syria about the Uighurs and other terrorist groups.

The outbreak of war in Ukraine and the international turmoil and confusion it is creating, has made Syria's joining BRI timely and critically vital. As the partnership develops and becomes institutionalized, the economic and security interests of China and Syria will become more interactive and interdependent. The scope and reach of BRI in Syria will advance and will be almost impossible to reverse.

<sup>55</sup> MEI. @ 75, “China Plays the Long Game in Syria”, Middle East Institute, February 10, 2017.  
[https:// www.mei.edu>publications.](https://www.mei.edu/publications)

## 4. THE STRUGGLE FOR THE LEVANT<sup>56</sup>

So far, the focus of discussion has been on Syria's formal participation in China's BRI and on explaining the benefits and opportunities it offers to both countries. To appreciate its full implications, it must be examined in the context of the Great Powers' struggle for the Middle East. This struggle has continued since recorded history. Its single most important cause is geographic location. Dynastic kingdoms, religious zealots, military adventurers and colonialists have all fought to gain a foothold in this strategic area. The ancient empires of Assyria, Babylonia, Egypt, Greece and Rome came, conquered and left. Later European Kingdoms, wielding the banner of the Crusades, colonized geographic Syria over a period of more than four centuries. Even after several defeats by Salah-Eddine and his successors between 1187 and 1291, they kept trying to return until they suffered a final and decisive rout by the Ottomans in 1453.

The European colonial powers always lusted after the "Eastern Provinces" of the Ottoman Empire. In 1916, Britain and France, in anticipation of its fall, signed the Sykes-Picot agreement, dividing between them the Ottomans' Arab regions, mostly geographic Syria and Mesopotamia.

Following World War I, Britain and France occupied Syria in 1918 under a "Mandate" from the League of Nations to "prepare the areas in their charge for self-rule." Instead, they dismembered Syria to create dependent ministates which they could control and rule as colonial possessions. The boundaries of the new states were drawn with utter

disregard to the wishes of the indigenous people and ignored the commonalities and interactions that had existed between them for millennia.<sup>57</sup> It is worth noting that Russia was party to a similar agreement signed in 1915 but pulled out in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. Britain and France divided and ruled the Arab provinces of the Ottoman empire from 1918 to 1946/47.

### 4.1 TARGETS OF THIS STRUGGLE

The states thus created have always been unstable, vulnerable and effectively unsustainable. Britain and France, by decimating Syria's political geography, violated the terms of their League of Nations mandate and destroyed the country's economic and societal unity. Since 1920, what remained of geographic Syria has been under attack by Western Powers, mostly by indirect intervention though sometimes by direct assault. The current war on Syria demonstrates both.

The main targets in the struggle for the Middle East today are as they were before: Syria and Iraq. Their central geographic location and natural resources have been coveted by world powers for centuries. The lasting geostrategic importance of this region can be demonstrated by paraphrasing Halford Mackinder's famous triptych as follows:<sup>58</sup>

**Who controls Geographic Syria and Mesopotamia controls the Middle East.**

**Who controls the Middle East controls the central passages, East and West.**

<sup>56</sup> The term Levant is used to mean Geographic Syria and Mesopotamia. The term Middle East includes Arabia, Iran and Turkey. The Term Arabia includes Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman and the Gulf States.

<sup>57</sup> Barr J. *A Line in the Sand*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2012, Part One, "The Carve Up 1915-1919".

<sup>58</sup> Parker G. *Western Geopolitical Thought*, Beckenham UK, Groom Helm Ltd. 1985, P.21.

## **Who controls the passages controls the world's center, Africa, Asia and Europe.**

More specifically, Syria and Iraq are crucial for China's BRI because they provide the link from Iran to the Middle East and the Mediterranean. China has secured two bridgeheads for BRI, one in Iran and the other in Syria. Iraq is the missing link, and the US will do its utmost to prevent that from forming. Hence, Iraq will remain one of the main flashpoints in the region. Its fragmented socio-political structure and its sectarian/ethnic political system render it an easy prey to foreign intervention. Syria and Iran are already participants in BRI. This puts pressure on Iraq to join. The return of US forces to Iraq and US occupation of Northern Syria becomes obvious when viewed from this perspective.

**“ China has secured two bridgeheads for BRI, one in Iran and the other in Syria. Iraq is the missing link, and the US will do its utmost to prevent that from forming. Hence, Iraq will remain one of the main flashpoints in the region. ”**

The international balance of power is shifting drastically and creating new realities in the struggle for the Middle East. Most significant is the emergence of new global great powers limiting the effectiveness of “soft or hard power intervention”. The failure of the war on Syria, raging since 2011, which aimed to destroy the Syrian state, change its regime and alter its policies is evidence of this. China's entry into Middle Eastern politics through its BRI brings into the region a fresh approach to international political and economic relations based on principles diametrically opposite to the earlier approaches of the US and the European powers,

including Russia.<sup>59</sup> Other more subtle, though no less significant developments in this respect, are the dilemmas faced by the actors in this power game.

## **4.2 SYRIA CASTS OFF THE SYKES-PICOT LEGACY**

By joining BRI in 2022, Syria has opened a new chapter in its political history and is embarking on a different experience in its international relations. Syria automatically becomes part of China's Grand Strategy and therefore falls within the extended security boundaries of Chinese national interests. As Syria's economic and political relations with China develop, so too will their interdependence, thus integrating BRI into Syria's own Grand Strategy. When this happens, Syria will finally cast off the legacy of the Sykes-Picot Agreement and can start building a stable and modern national state. China's assistance and support will be necessary, but not sufficient. The Syrian leadership must rally its nation to this end. Sykes-Picot has been a yoke around Syria's neck for a century. It has obstructed its political development and economic growth, turning it into a “weak state” internally and a “vulnerable state” externally.<sup>60</sup>

**“ Sykes-Picot has been a yoke around Syria's neck for a century. It has obstructed its political development and economic growth, turning it into a “weak state” internally and a “vulnerable state” externally. ”**

The difference between China's foreign policy and those of other world powers has been explained.

<sup>59</sup> I have included Russia, because it is the product of the same European Imperialistic culture and behaves accordingly, regardless of who is ruling it.

<sup>60</sup> An explanation of weak and vulnerable states is provided in Barry Buzan's book, *People, States and Fear*, Harlow, UK: Pearson Education limited, 1991, Chapter. 8.

China's entry into the Middle East is a "game changer" involving a new vision of world economic development and of security relationships. A recently published "Position Paper on China's new security concept" outlines China's policy as follows:

**"China puts forward the initiative that countries in the region jointly cultivate a new concept of security, which focuses on enhancing trust through dialogue, and promoting security through cooperation"**<sup>61</sup>.

China considers this new security concept as integral to its Grand Strategy for sustained economic growth and extended geographic reach, placing therefore the struggle for global power in a different context. This is China's first ever entry into the Middle East. Its goals and operating strategies are different. Not only does this change the rules of the game, but also its means and ends.

Although BRI's geographic scope is global, its structure is based on the cooperation of interconnected regional entities. The Middle East, with its strategic geographic location and rich mineral resources, will remain an arena of struggle, with Syria occupying center stage. The battle lines have already been drawn. This struggle, with BRI as its main focus, is almost unstoppable.

Today BRI is the main focus of this struggle. BRI will be opposed and vigorously contested, but its ultimate success is evidenced by the fact that 'more than 150 nations or more than 75% of the UN states are members and partners in the Belt and Road Initiative, in addition to 32 international organizations.'<sup>62</sup>

The advent of BRI to the Middle East not only brings a new global actor but also changes the nature of the game and its rules. There are now at

least two Great Powers. Their behavior is governed by the rules of the international security dilemma where states choose between taking measures to counter what they perceive as a threat to their national security, and risk escalatory responses, or take the position of "wait and see" and risk being attacked. Historically, states have often taken the first option, but recent conflicts, especially the Ukrainian War, indicate a more cautious approach and a shift towards the latter option.

## 4.3 KEY PLAYERS AND AUXILIARIES

The current struggle for the Middle East is complex and multifaceted. It involves two principal actors and several auxiliaries of varying capabilities and playing different roles. It is useful to identify these actors and to understand their motives, goals and effectiveness in this "struggle of the giants".

The actors in the present struggle for the Middle East fall into two broad categories; principal actors and the supporting cast. The principal or lead actors are those with the political and military power to be the ultimate decision makers. The auxiliaries, or supporting cast, operate within the defined policy parameters of the leading actors and usually under their direction. They, in turn, can be classified into two groups; the old European powers and the emerging powers of the Middle East.

China and the USA are the principal actors in this Great Powers' game. Other European powers like Britain, France, and Germany play a subordinate role to the US. By virtue of its military presence, Russia's role in Syria is indisputable, however ambiguous and ill-defined. The main regional actors are Turkey, Iran, Iraq and to a certain extent Israel. Iraq is an important "contested" country but for the time being the contest is between the USA and Iran with China observing closely. Turkey, on the other hand, is trying to carve out a role for itself by occupying parts of Syria and Iraq, but its effectiveness is doubtful and compromised by the dilemma of following the US as a member

61 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "China's Position Paper on the New Security Concept", March 20, 2022, <https://www.fm-prc.gov.cn/ce/ceun/eng/xw/127742.htm>.

62 O'Connor T., "Syria Officially Joins China's Belt and Road, Newsweek, 1/ 12 / 2022.

of NATO and, at the same time, flirting with Russia to maximize its gains. Israel can act as a US “catspaw”, but its effectiveness is constrained by its capabilities and limited national resources. The role of other Arab actors is not negligible but is confined to bankrolling the US and its allies directly or, indirectly, by the purchase of arms.

The struggle for the Middle East is primarily between China and the USA, the two principal actors. The latter perceives China's economic and political expansion through the BRI as a threat to be countered and preferably stopped altogether. China must support the BRI to sustain its rapid economic development by opening new export markets for its goods, services, capital, technologies and labor and to extend its political connectivity and influence. By embedding BRI in Syria and its Eastern Mediterranean ports, China opens additional locations and opportunities for its initiative, such as cutting transportation time and cost and reducing its dependence on the bottlenecks of the Straits of Malacca and both ends of the Red Sea, the Suez Canal and Bab al-Mandab.

Syria has always been a crucial part of the struggle for the Middle East and has suffered direct attack and intervention since 1920. Even after its independence and in its truncated state, the wars against Syria continued under more than one guise and by different means, causing it to feel insecure within its new reduced boundaries and regional environs. Today Syria is still under attack finding itself between the hammer of the USA and its allies and the “anvil” of Russia.

China provides Syria with an opportunity to cast off the legacy of the Sykes-Picot arrangement and the farcical Mandate of the League of Nations. For the first time in its contemporary history, Syria can make a fresh start. The Syrian leadership must embrace China's experience of rapid and integrated development to rebuild the Syrian state apparatus, its national security and economy, in that order of priority. National security as the prime object of the state needs effective state institutions based on a

set of principles that define its purpose and mission around which its people can rally. Economic growth is essential for the endurance of any state, but without security all states are vulnerable and can be quickly destroyed, as recent experience in Syria shows. By joining BRI, Syria is seeking to end the Great Powers' attempts to “divide and rule” it and at the same time use China's assistance to build a politically cohesive and economically viable state.

**“ The struggle for the Middle East is primarily between China and the USA, the two principal actors. The latter perceives China's economic and political expansion through the BRI as a threat to be countered and preferably stopped altogether. ”**

Syria's participation in the BRI thus makes it a party to the “game of nations,” but in a different role. Instead of being just a battleground and always on the receiving end, its alliance with China promotes it to an actor. The alliance between China and Syria is based on the four principles of mutual trust, shared benefits, interdependence and longevity. The opposition of the US and its partners to this growing and positive relationship keeps Syria as an active and front-line player in the ongoing struggle for the Middle East.

The other principal actor, the USA, has already designated China as a threat, and is leading its allies in a crusade to fight BRI. In 2017, US Secretary of State Tillerson described “China's model of financing infrastructure as predatory economics resulting in financing default and conversion of debt into equity.”<sup>63</sup> US Vice President Pence addressing an APEC Conference in November 2018, reiterated the same sentiments saying, “we do not drown

63 Rolland N., “A Concise Guide to the Belt and Road Initiative” <https://www.nbr.org/publication>. April 11, 2019, P.9.



our partners in a sea of debt. We don't coerce or compromise your independence. We do not offer one constricting belt or a one-way road.”<sup>64</sup> More recently, President Biden has voiced his opposition in no uncertain terms, promising to invest US\$8 billion to create a competing program.

These pronouncements show how concerned and nervous the US is about China's rapid economic development and the expansion of its BRI. Unsurprisingly, US politicians have kept quiet about the previous US policy to strengthen China as a counterbalance to the Soviet Union. Now that its equally shortsighted policy of “my enemy's enemy is my friend” has failed, it is shirking its responsibility for the outcome and has resorted to charging windmills like Don Quixote. The role of the US in this struggle will depend on how long it can maintain both its occupation of Syria and its military presence in Iraq. The European Union plays only a secondary role by assisting the US as and how it requires. The same can be said of Australia, Japan and other Asian states.

In the last five years, US administrations have sponsored several regional conferences to counter China's BRI<sup>65</sup> Much was promised but little has been achieved. The US and its allies have been unable to muster the financial resources to match China's, nor can they provide a credible alternative to its BRI. Perhaps this is caused by domestic structural financial limitations, or an unwillingness to be involved in wars of resource attrition like those imposed on the Soviet Union a few decades earlier. Whatever the reasons, time is not on the side of the Americans. China considers BRI necessary for its survival and it is very unlikely that it will turn back.

Iran and Turkey are two regional states that can play a role in this struggle for the Middle East because they are both present in Syria. Iran is there as a close ally and Turkey as an occupation force. Turkey's role will be contingent on how long Mr.

Erdogan stays in power and upon the outcome of his war against the Kurds, who happen to be allied to the US. Iran's role, on the other hand, is organic and by far more important by virtue of its strategic alliance with China and by being the bridgehead awaiting connection via Iraq to Syria and its ports on the Eastern Mediterranean coast. This does not mean that other states in the region are irrelevant but their role with respect to Syria's participation in BRI, at least presently, is peripheral and directed by the US.

Iraq's role as an actor is limited by its domestic political problems, exposing it as the major arena of conflict between the US and Iran directly, and the US and China indirectly. With mounting political interventions, a destabilized Iraq will remain in limbo until the conflict between Iran and the US is settled. Regardless of the outcome, China must soon become involved in Iraq, because Iraq is now the missing link between BRI's bridgeheads in Iran and Syria. Moreover, Iraq has large energy reserves that China cannot ignore. Plans are being considered by Iran and Iraq to develop a rail system across their borders at Basra and Shamlamcheck which connects with ports in the Persian Gulf South and with other BRI “economic corridors” to the North and Northwest. Now that Syria has joined BRI, Iraq will inevitably be the next flash point and major battlefield in the ongoing struggle for control of the Middle East.

Russia's role has been important in this game of nations, but it is no longer decisive. The war in Ukraine has exposed Russia's military and economic limitations, as the war in Afghanistan did to the US. Mr. Putin's opportunistic policy in Syria is in shambles and his regional “partners”, Turkey and Israel, have shown their true colors in the Ukraine war. They flatter Russia with lip service but provide the Ukrainian authorities with military hardware.

64 *Ibid.* P.9.

65 For a list of those conferences see, *Ibid.*, Pp.10-11.

## 4.4 THE BATTLE FOR BRI IN THE LEVANT

This section focusses on the nature, conduct and possible outcome of the battle over BRI in the Levant, one which is already underway. The rapidly changing strategic environment worldwide and the unclear operational plans and dispositions of the actors involved make this prediction difficult. The conclusions are both speculative and tentative, but offer a glimpse into how this battle is likely to develop.

Today's struggle for the Middle East is between China and the US. It will be fought and decided, within the next couple of years, in Iraq and Syria. The reoccupation of Iraq by the US in 2014 and its continued military presence in Northern Syria under the pretense of fighting terrorism must be understood as part of that struggle. China and its BRI are already in Syria. An about-turn is most unlikely. The US will hold onto Iraq, the missing link between Iran and Syria, and onto Northern Syria for as long it can. Russia, Turkey and Iran are doing likewise. For the moment, this is a stalemate broken by frequent skirmishes to test one another's intentions and responses and one which raises several questions:

- Is the current quasi-stalemate sustainable, and for how long?
- For how long can the US occupy Syria and Iraq, and at what cost?
- How far will China project its military power to secure its BRI in Syria?
- Will the Ukraine war influence Russia's Policy in Syria, if so how?
- Can Turkey stay in Syria given the region's changing strategic environment?
- Will a US/Iran rapprochement affect the struggle for the Middle East?

We must wait for the future to answer these questions. However, posing them and briefly exploring them, highlights salient issues in the evolving struggle for China's BRI in the Middle East.

An examination of the issues facing all actors reveals two realities. Firstly, the ultimate object of the struggle is BRI. Secondly, all participants face a security dilemma. Each must choose between a war that cannot be ended by victory, or an impending threat that might develop into a war which takes them by surprise and which they might lose. This

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is not a hypothetical proposition, but a reality evidenced by the Great Powers' circumspect policies in the Ukraine. The US and the European Union have driven the Russians into a futile war which they do not wish to fight themselves. They are happy to arm the Ukrainians, but no-one wants a direct military confrontation with the Russian army. In similar fashion, the Russians perceiving the threat emanating from the Ukraine in the form of NATO, embarked upon a war that they cannot be sure of bringing to their desired end.

Returning to the questions listed above, the war on Syria has been reduced to a simmer and Iraq is becoming the next arena of struggle in the Middle East. Presently there is a quasi-stalemate in both countries. The failure of any actor to achieve a decisive victory, and the changes in the regional and global balances of power provide one explanation. Regional actors, like Turkey and Iran, are incapable of forcing a decisive outcome and the major international powers like China, the USA or Russia are reluctant to undertake a protracted war

of attrition. The failure of the strategy of “regime change” in Syria, the chaotic political state of Iraq and most recently the war in Ukraine are sobering examples. None of the actors in the conflict enjoy the luxury of time. Sooner rather than later, their security dilemma will force them to act and react, as it always has done and will always do.

The answer to the second question concerning American occupation of Syria is more complex but its broad outlines can be discerned and examined. The US, today, has a larger military presence and a greater political influence than any other power. Yet it seems uncertain about how and where to respond to the threats it perceives to its national interests in the region. BRI in Syria is one such threat and the main reason behind its occupation of Northern Syria. Its allies in Western Europe do not have the military means to start or end such a war. They will most probably follow its lead and try to provide nominal help, but the full burden of the war must fall on the US. The other two US allies, Israel and Turkey, will not get involved unless the situation escalates to a major war in which they must choose sides. That leaves the two nonstate actors, the Kurdish militias and Da'esh. Both have been used as a questionable excuse to justify the US occupation of Syria and Iraq. Paradoxically, their survival is totally dependent on the presence of US military forces in the area. In Iraq, the US has the political and military capability, but this is not sufficient to face the combined opposition of Iran and its Iraqi Shi'a allies. Under these conditions, and short of a sudden decision to go into a major war in the Middle East, the most likely posture of the US is not to change the political and strategic status quo.

China, the other key actor in the struggle for the Middle East, has developed substantial economic interests in Syria and in Iraq, but its political involvement has mainly focused on developing its diplomatic relations. With Syria joining BRI in January 2022, China, has firmed its political and strategic presence, not only in Syria but in the Middle East in general. China is soon expected to

consolidate and expand its existing investments in Syria and participate actively in its reconstruction and economic development programs. Syria is billed to become a pivotal node in the China-central and west Asia economic corridor and its ports will provide a major transit and trade hub in the Eastern Mediterranean. Inevitably, Syria will be the recipient of significant infrastructure investments from China for the development and geographic expansion of its BRI. Chinese officials have said on several occasions that China anticipates being paid for its investments in Syria with oil and gas.

Even before joining BRI, Syria was among China's largest trading partners in the region with a total trade volume since 1989 of US\$ 51.3 billion. Syria had also signed cooperation agreements with at least 200 Chinese companies for which China had allocated US\$ 23 billion. The National Petroleum Corporation of China is reported to have acquired a significant share in Syria's largest oil companies: The Syrian Oil Company and the Al-Furat Petroleum Company. Now that Syria has become part of BRI, China's investments will expand in scope and size, especially in the energy sector. Once that happens, Syria will fall within the security boundaries of China's national interests and will become a part of BRI's security that China will need to defend.

As China's BRI develops, and its investments in Syria increase, China will not be able to remain reticent about the US and its Kurdish mercenaries purloining Syria's oil and selling it illegally on the black market. The US has not declared war on Syria and therefore cannot claim that the oil is a war spoil. So far, the Syrians have not been able to act, but they will. If China is planning to be paid in Syrian oil, it cannot afford to let it go to Kurdish and Islamic mercenaries. The open front with Russia in the Ukraine and the mounting military tension with China in the Pacific region will bring significant pressure to bear on America's continued presence in the Levant. Eventually the US will need to consolidate its power where its national security is most threatened, and it will have to withdraw



from Syria and Iraq. The Kurds in Syria will be left to face their fate alone, as happened to America's Afghani allies.

It will be difficult for the US and its allies to maintain the current quasi-stalemate much longer. They are already under pressure in Iraq, Iran and Syria. Resistance to American military presence in Syria and Iraq will strengthen, making it difficult and costly for the US to stay. Nor will either Turkey or Israel be able to provide much assistance. Iraqi Kurdistan, America's main military base in the area, with the Syrian Kurds as its local allies in North Syria will have a limited effect in supporting its strategies.

US policy under President Trump resulted in the formation of a formidable alliance concentrated on China, Russia, Iran and Syria, the four countries connecting the Chinese Pacific Ocean with the Five Seas. Iran and Syria are already an integral part of BRI. The Ukrainian war has brought Russia closer to China. Iraq is on the sidelines for the time being, but it will eventually fall in with Syria and Iran. China's BRI, with its huge financial capabilities, is probably Iraq's only credible option for reconstruction. If crippling debts are to be avoided, any repayment for this is likely to be in oil.

Russia will still play a role in Syria, but at a much-diminished level. Its failure to help Syria end its war earlier, the main reason its participation was solicited, has cost Syria dearly and has also limited Russia's effectiveness as a major player in the struggle for the Middle East. Russia's role in Syria has been equivocal and self-serving. Mr. Putin's response to Syria's call for assistance in its war against terrorism, NATO and a score of regional states was not altruistic. Russia's primary motive was to realize its old dream of a foothold in the "warm waters" of the Mediterranean and, importantly, to use its presence in Syria to further its strategic and economic interests in the region. Supporting the Syrian State and its regime was the necessary means to achieve those ends. If Russia's military operations are followed on a map of Syria,

it becomes clear that its defense of Syria's national security does not extend beyond the boundaries of its own strategic and security interests. Russia's strategy in Syria was, from the start, to maintain the status quo, rather than end the war. The real purpose was to keep Syria dependent on Russian military support to enable Russia to stay in Syria and use its presence as a base to cultivate commercial and political relations with Syria's adversaries, Turkey and Israel.

A former US intelligence officer described Russia's role in the Middle East as "jack of all trades, master of none".<sup>66</sup> Russia's war in the Ukraine and its questionable policies in Syria will certainly limit its effectiveness in the area. Sooner or later, China will have to find ways to defend its BRI in Syria. Once that happens, Russia will find it difficult to justify its military presence in Syria. Russia's vital contribution to protect and preserve the Syrian State is undeniable but, unlike other regional friends of Russia, the Syrian people and government have expressed their gratitude by giving their unequivocal support to Russia in the UN and other international forums. Nonetheless, and regardless of how Russia comes out of its war in Ukraine, it will never play an effective and leading role in Syria. Russia will probably be allowed to keep its military bases in Syria, but its role will be secondary to China and Iran.

Turkey, by virtue of its location, history and Islamic culture, has always been an influential actor in Syria. Its policies under Mr. Erdogan have oscillated between amity, appeasement, and enmity for two conflicting reasons: his ambition to lead the Arab world and his obligations as a member of NATO. In the attempted pursuit of both, he has spearheaded the war on Syria, sponsoring and harboring its local enemies and recruiting and mobilizing the Islamic fundamentalist terrorists to bring about the downfall of the Syrian State. In the process, he has tried to steal Syria's territory, history, cultural heritage and

66 Rumer E., "Russia in the Middle East: Jack of all Trades Master of None", *Carnegie Paper*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, DC; October 31, 2019. <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

economic and industrial assets. Nevertheless, Mr. Erdogan is only a puppet. The US holds all the strings that make him move. Like all puppets, Mr. Erdogan can only perform according to the script written by the Puppet Master, the USA. Puppets can neither decide nor act independently. All they can do is Obey. Mr. Erdogan's true role in Syria can only be explained and understood from this perspective.

Mr. Erdogan succeeded in coming to power by reinvigorating the dormant but still live Islamic sentiments of the average man in Turkey, and synthesizing these with the strong nationalist ideas of Ataturk. This was and still is the winning card of the Party for Justice and Development, which keeps Erdogan in power. His political performance, both domestically and internationally, has not been as successful as he promised, casting doubt on his leadership and on the continued support of his political party. Also, Mr. Erdogan has failed to convince anyone, save himself, that he is the long-awaited heir of the Ottoman Sultanate and the man to revive the Islamic world. His ambitious plan to become the leader of the Arab World has also failed because he could not overcome the combined opposition of Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

Turkey's occupation of Syria has been sustained by the tacit approval of the USA, the duplicity of Russia and Arab oil money. This support is now waning rapidly. Mr. Erdogan's recent approach to Israel for support is a sign of desperation, indeed failure. Under these circumstances, Turkey's role in Syria is in decline. Mr. Erdogan's mercenaries will become a financial burden to Turkey once the funding from the Gulf States ebbs away and those mercenaries will eventually become redundant in Syria and dangerous to Turkey. He will also be forced to fight the Kurdish separatists, not only in Syria and Iraq, but inside his own borders, and must do so without compromising the interests of the USA, their protector. Turkey's role in Syria depends therefore on how far it serves the strategic interests of the US and how those interests develop. The step from victor to victim can be short.

The Kurds, a non-state actor in the Middle East, are in a worse position. Land locked, they are surrounded by enemies on all sides: Turkey, Iran, and even Iraq. They are divided among themselves and lack the socio-political cohesion to allow them to act in unison. They therefore cannot act as one group and are without the necessary means to do so. They will always be weak domestically and vulnerable externally. With the shifts in the loci of power, it is doubtful whether the Kurds can continue to act as mercenaries and agents. Their dependence on major powers like the US and others like Israel is futile in the short term and suicidal in the long term. Until recently, the Kurds have been an integral part of the social fabric of the countries in which they live. Unless they re-integrate and reconcile themselves with their fellow countrymen, their present leaders will lead them from one disaster to another, as they have done for years. In the coming struggle for the Middle East, they can act only as mercenaries, to be used and discarded when their usefulness expires.

The main battlefield in the struggle for the Middle East will be Iraq. Syria will remain a hotspot. All actors will have to take China's presence into account. China is not only a new player in the region, but also a game changer. The leaders of the region, especially of Syria and Iraq, must understand that the old policies of divide and rule are continuing despite everything. What is happening now is another attempt by Western powers to reorganize the political geography of the two countries, as they did with the Sykes-Picot arrangement of 1916. To avoid the mistakes and disasters of the past century, the people and leaders of Syria and Iraq should cooperate closely and face together this new existential threat. If this happens, the rest of the region will follow suit.

## 5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This section is in three parts. The first is a summary of BRI's main features. The second part outlines the strategic implications of Syria's formal participation in it. The third part is a short statement of the main conclusions of this enquiry.

### 5.1 CHINA'S BRI, ENDS AND MEANS

China's BRI is not only a global economic development initiative, but the living proof of China's emergence from relative obscurity to become the second largest world power in the span of just seventy years. BRI is an integral part of China's global Grand Strategy. Its success is imperative for the survival of the state of China, both internationally and domestically. The Chinese government is committed to expanding BRI in scope and geographic reach, with "no turning back".

This dramatic achievement is due to a committed leadership which is determined to direct national resources towards clearly defined goals, a disciplined workforce and a population which is highly motivated by success as a way of life. China's BRI must be understood in the context of an ideology that derives from two Confucian maxims; an urge for excellence, and also for socio-political progress, both of which are essential for the attainment of universal harmony and peace. In recent years China's leaders have worked hard to integrate communist ideology with Confucian spiritual beliefs. Their intention is to inspire the people to adopt China's Grand Strategy, by integrating its ideology with traditional beliefs, societal organization and way of life.

China's success is basically a revival of a great civilization; one which is sufficiently flexible to accommodate change, adopt new ways

and integrate them socio-politically without contradictions or conflicts with identity and cultural heritage including religion. This unique feat has held the country together while moving it forward politically, socially and economically despite the problems inherent in its size, demographic diversities and years of economic stagnation.<sup>67</sup> Syria could do well to learn how China marshaled its huge population into a critical mass capable of initiating and sustaining a chain reaction that unified its people in the support of reforms and change, as well as accepting the costs involved.

BRI, the major driver of China's grand strategy, is holistic and long term. It is holistic because it is global. All state resources are utilized to achieve its "existential national interests", across the entire spectrum of statecraft, whether political, diplomatic, economic, social, technological and military. It is long term because of the nature and purpose of its investments in infrastructure and large-scale developmental programs. This places a high premium on stability, reliability, interdependence and mutual benefits, all mandatory for BRI's success and continuity.

This initiative is not an invention of China's Communist Party, but the revival of an ancient concept of trade and cultural exchange between East and West. This concept is deeply rooted in Chinese history and dates back to the year 130 BC

<sup>67</sup> In contrast Arab elites failed to find the missing link and common denominator between Arab nationalism and their cultural Islamic heritage. Hence, they failed to relate to the daily life of the ordinary people and their ideas remained elitist. What is needed is an Arab ideology that penetrates the hearts and minds of the average Arab by being a part of his practical life. Economic progress and equitable distribution of wealth are necessary but not sufficient. Equally important is a set of beliefs and social values that one can relate to instinctively. China provides an example worth studying.

**“ This initiative is not an invention of China’s Communist Party, but the revival of an ancient concept of trade and cultural exchange between East and West. This concept is deeply rooted in Chinese history and dates back to the year 130 BC and the Han Dynasty. Its approach to international economic and political cooperation and connectivity is however novel, and differs from other intra-state initiatives, such as the Marshall Plan, US Aid, the European Common Market and the European Union. ”**

and the Han Dynasty. Its approach to international economic and political cooperation and connectivity is however novel, and differs from other intra-state initiatives, such as the Marshall Plan, US Aid, the European Common Market and the European Union. China’s BRI does not require states to alter their political or social system and does not involve any reorganization of their political geography. Although its structure is regionally based and co-existent with regional cooperation bodies such as ASEAN, CAREC and SASEG, these are seen as supportive of BRI and complementary to its aims.

BRI is a two-pronged strategy to link China with the rest of the world via maritime and land networks that include roads, ports, transit hubs, energy facilities and other infrastructures. The overland networks are comprised of five economic corridors linking China to the rest of Asia, Europe and Africa and a sixth corridor connecting China to Europe via the North Pole. The Maritime Lanes network connects China’s coastal regions to Southeast Asia, Indonesia, the Straits of Malacca, the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. By reviving the Silk Road concept, China seeks to achieve the main goals of its Grand Strategy:

- Rapid economic growth.
- Open access to global markets.
- Extension of political influence to become a major world power and fulfill the so-called China Dream.
- Base its international relations on cooperation rather than domination, in accordance with Confucian principles which highlight a peaceful consultative and mutually beneficial approach towards building a harmonious world or what President Jinping called a community of shared interests.<sup>68</sup>

The basic aim of China’s BRI is to find market outlets for its exports. As important is to gain free access to sources of raw materials and energy essential for its fast-growing economy. China plans to achieve the following through BRI:

- Export capital, labor and technology which are surplus to its domestic needs.
- Secure business for Chinese companies in developing countries.
- Promote alignment of economic and political goals with other countries.
- Emphasize China’s commitment to multilateral cooperation and shared benefits.
- Extend national interest globally without hegemonic intervention.

According to Chinese officials, the above objective of BRI will be achieved in accordance with seven “policy initiatives”:

1. Coordination of BRI members’ policies.
2. Establishment of infrastructure linkages.
3. Ensuring free flow of trade, capital and labor.
4. Financial integration and cooperation.
5. Promoting connectivity of people.
6. Nonintervention and respect for other peoples’ wishes.
7. Long term view and continuity.

<sup>68</sup> Zhang Z., “The Belt and Road Initiative: China’s New Geopolitical Strategy” *Working Paper, Research Division, Asia*, Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Oct. 2019.

BRI's security needs are complex, varied and dynamic, not only because they involve countries of different sizes, capabilities, requirements and cultures, but also because its political and social environments are in continuous flux. To succeed, it must continue to push forward but at the same time it must remain flexible enough to accommodate other peoples' concerns and fears. China argues that BRI should not pose a threat to other states because it is a set of autonomous bilateral and multilateral partnerships between China and willing participants. Its symbiotic and interdependent structure intended to ensure the fair sharing of benefits and to guarantee longevity is also emphasized.

Nevertheless, many countries are concerned by the global nature of BRI and its continuously expanding scope and extended geographic reach. As China's vital national interests become more and more vested in BRI, its protection become a critical component of China's security policy and military strategy. Defending the dynamic boundaries of its national interests will intersect with the interest of other countries leading to conflicts that China claims it wishes to avoid. Hence, while China desires sustained economic development and global reach, the need to defend its shifting national interests caused by BRI's expanding horizons could lead it into the trap of the security dilemma. The Chinese leaders seem to believe that the basic principles governing BRI's expansion and its ascribed means and ends, contain all necessary and sufficient safeguards to prevent this happening.

## 5.2 TOWARDS A FRESH START IN SYRIA

China, as a world power, decided to use Syria as its main gateway into the Levant. This carries two significant symbolic connotations for Syria. It confirms the enduring importance of its geographic location and reestablishes its historical role as a crucial link in the Silk Road. It is also one of the most critical developments in Syria's contemporary political history for the following reasons:

- China is the first non-Western world power to enter the region, at least since 1920.
- China brings a new approach to international relations which is diametrically opposite to the familiar hegemonic Western approach suffered by Syria.
- Syria, for the first time in its modern history has a real opportunity to organize its political geography and system of governance without hostile outside intervention and in accordance with the wishes and aspirations of its people.
- Syria's great power alliance options have increased. It can now consider a Grand Strategy free of the Sykes-Picot legacy.

By joining China's BRI, Syria can now make a fresh start, politically, economically and socially. To succeed, it must undo the archaic and corrupt practices prevalent since Ottoman times, and that were subsequently reinforced by France and the Western Powers. These facts have been chronicled and confirmed by all who have written about modern Syria such as Philip Khoury, Patrick Seal, Miles Copeland and Andrew Rathmell.<sup>69</sup>

The choice of Syria as BRI's first major entry point into the Middle East affirms China's confidence in Syria's regional presence and role. China's plans call for creating several "economic corridors" throughout the Middle East. Syria is well positioned to provide the linkages and connectivity for a multi-nodal network of land routes and searoutes that feed into other BRI economic corridors. Furthermore, Syria can serve as a pivotal base for China's expansion of the BRI's geographic reach by forming regional financial, economic and security organizations like, for example, ASEAN. This foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean is a necessary step for China to further BRI's overland and maritime components.

The benefits that accrue to Syria are not only

<sup>69</sup> There is hardly a book on the history of modern Syria that does not chronicle these facts. The books by the authors noted above can be referred to on the net.



economic, but also political and strategic. China's economic and commercial relations with Syria have been growing for decades. They have survived the war on Syria, Western sanctions and incursions by Islamic terrorists and other mercenaries. Economic relationships between China and Syria had already reached an advanced level before the signature of the BRI Memorandum of Understanding in January 2022. China's total investments in Syria amounted to US\$ 136 billion by the end of 2019, in addition to its acquisition of substantial equity in two major oil companies in Northern Syria. In 2021, the Syrian Government awarded huge contracts to Chinese companies for the construction of power lines and relay stations and for building more than 1000 schools.<sup>70</sup>

Syria's main gains will be of a long-term nature, but there are several that will bring benefit in the short and medium term. The most important is having in China an additional ally to Russia, even indeed an alternative. Russia's war in Ukraine, and its potential repercussions, make this critically important. In the medium-term, China's involvement in Syria will mitigate the economic and political damage of Western sanctions and will assist its gradual recovery. Syria's partnership with China therefore represents a historical leap in its foreign policy which cannot be overemphasized.

Intervention in Syria by France, Britain and later by the US, has continued since the end of World War I. Its purpose has always been to divide Syria and create smaller weaker states which are more easily manipulated. And, as Miles Copeland observed in reference to US intervention in Syria between 1947 and 1948, "if you cannot change the board, change the players" or in other words "change the regime."<sup>71</sup>

Chapter 2 of Copeland's book, "The Game of Nations" provides an eyewitness account of the

means deployed by the US to make regime change and rig "democratic elections". First tried in 1947/49 in Syria as an "experiment", it has later become standard US practice. It is currently being repeated in Lebanon in a ceaseless attempt to change the local players.

The current war, despite its long duration, ferocity and enormous financial cost, has failed to achieve its prime objective, namely to obliterate the Syrian State, break the will of its people and destroy its territorial unity. This not only confirms the tenacity of the Syrian people in defending their country regardless of the terrible cost to them, but also confirms that what has remained of Geographic Syria is the indivisible core area that still attracts its "periphery areas" and their people<sup>72</sup>. Political geographers liken a "core area" to the nucleus of an atom with a core and peripheral elements. The closer the peripheral elements are to the core in space and in shared socio-economic interests, the greater their attraction to the core and vice versa. Syria provides an excellent case study of the core phenomenon and should be seriously considered by political geographers.

The reorganization of the political geography of the Levant and particularly Syria, has continued since 1919. Direct wars, covert and overt intervention, coup d'états, bribery of politicians and political parties, the fostering of ethnic feuds and regime change have been used regularly. The tactical means may vary but the strategic aim of divide and rule never changes. In essence, this is what Copeland called the Game of Nations, others the struggle for power in the Middle East. Regardless of its title, this is a relentless attempt by the great powers of the day to control that strategic geographic space at the crossroads of three continents called the Levant.

<sup>70</sup> [https:// www. globaltimes.cn/page/202111/2430.shtml](https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202111/2430.shtml).

<sup>71</sup> Copeland M. The Game of Nations, New York: Simon & Schuster 1969, Chapter 2.

<sup>72</sup> The "core area" concept is used in political geography literature to explain the geographical formation of states. It postulates that political entities form around a nucleus that people consider as crucial to their existence. Today's Syria is such a core entity. For more than a century it has defied the world's powers to divide it further. The present war is a clear statement of that defiance and struggle.



**“ The Crusades were among the early European attempts to occupy this region, but they were unable to colonize it or to stay. Following the defeat of the Ottomans in World War I, the French and the British tried again to hold the region, but succeeded only in dividing it into weak, vulnerable and dependent states. ”**

The Crusades were among the early European attempts to occupy this region, but they were unable to colonize it or to stay. Following the defeat of the Ottomans in World War I, the French and the British tried again to hold the region, but succeeded only in dividing it into weak, vulnerable and dependent states ruled by their local puppets. This, the real legacy of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, has governed the political life of the region and impeded normal political and economic development. By joining China's BRI, Syria has finally succeeded in freeing itself from its suzerainty.

The political and economic landscape of the world is changing rapidly. So too are the loci of power. China's rise from a disunited and underdeveloped country to a world power in less than 75 years is a manifestation of this development. Syria's participation in the BRI is timely because it has taken place just before Russia's involvement in the Ukraine and has opened other strategic options to Syria. It is a bold move. Syria is turning the direction of its foreign policy eastwards while still fighting a bloody war at home. This shift is not risk free, but is worth taking because the returns outweigh the costs many times over.

China's entry into the region through its BRI will bring drastic economic and strategic changes not only to Syria, but also to its neighboring countries and will sooner or later create security interests for China in Syria that must be protected and

defended. The boundaries of China's national security interests will be extended in tandem with the development and expansion of BRI. We know the goals of China's national security strategy in Syria, but how will they be achieved?

China's domestic economic and political welfare is contingent on BRI's continuity and growth. It will use all the instruments of power at its disposal to ensure the safety of its assets and investments. Syria is a strategic linchpin, not only because of Syria's geographic location and resources, but also because of its historic regional status and influence. It is not unreasonable to presume that China will soon develop a joint defense strategy with Syria. Chinese and foreign sources have recently reported that China is building naval facilities in Latakia and intends to base troops in Syria. None of this is yet certain.

Opposition to China's BRI in Syria is mounting, both regionally and internationally. It is too early to predict the resulting reaction and China's response. However, as BRI advances in Syria, so too will the boundaries of China's national interests and the need to defend them. The nature and size of BRI's economic and political assets will necessitate close joint security policies and defense strategies not only between China and Syria on a bilateral basis, but with other key regional participants such as Iraq and Iran.

Syria with China's backing can negate the Sykes-Picot legacy by consolidating its internal socio-political cohesion, modernizing its secular political system, reinforcing its social welfare organizations and extending its regional geographic reach by joint economic development programs and political cooperation.

## 5.3 CONCLUDING NOTES

The following concluding notes review very briefly the main arguments and key findings of this enquiry with special emphasis on the implications and consequences of Syria's recent move to join China's BRI.

- A Chinese official said recently that China's international relations policy recognizes that the

**“The world consists of different states and diverse nations. They need to exist peacefully and to progress the wellbeing of their people. This can only be achieved through mutual learning, mutual accommodation and greater cooperation not only among countries with views, ideologies and systems that are similar but with countries that differ. Economic exchange and regional cooperation are important to lasting peace”<sup>73</sup>.** China aims to become the world's strongest power and to achieve the so-called **“China dream by peaceful coexistence and a commonly beneficial approach towards building a harmonious world or a “community of shared interest”<sup>74</sup>.**

- BRI is the most important component of China's Grand Strategy for the Twenty First Century. It is the prime driving force for the sustained growth of its national economy and the extension of its global political and strategic influence. Though it will be opposed by other world powers, China is committed to its success and continuity. There will be no turning back.
- China views BRI as a long-term global initiative aimed at promoting people's connectivity, economic growth through cooperation and stability, benefit sharing and greater political understanding. Although its scope is global, it is structured on regional partnerships linked by common interests and features accelerated economic integration.
- The success and continuity of BRI are based on reliable and stable relationships, cooperation, interdependence, and equitable distribution of benefits. These key factors hold the structure together and reinforce its stability and longevity. Long term reliability is strengthened by interdependence, mutual benefits and sharing. BRI is

based on the trinity of economic growth, connectivity of peoples and collective security.

- China's BRI involves new concepts and practices in the field of international relations. Its expansion beyond its borders is based on non-intervention, integration, cooperation and benefit sharing rather than the Western colonial model based on annexation, exploitation and domination. Unlike all Great Powers preceding it, China rejects the age-old colonial policies of military conquest and exploitation and introduces, instead, a policy that gives greater consideration to cultural diversity, exchange of benefits and peaceful coexistence.
- Regardless of whether one is for or against China's BRI, two facts are undeniable. Firstly, this is a novel approach to international relations. It could change the way nations and people deal with one another. Secondly, this a unique opportunity for Syria to correct the injustices of the Sykes-Picot Agreement. The present war on Syria is a continuation of that same scheme. China comes to Syria with a different paradigm of international relations. Hence, Syria for first time in its modern history, can focus on building a secular and modern state.
- China chose Syria to launch the formal political entry of its BRI into the Middle East. Although China's economic presence in the region has been flourishing for decades, its political activities have remained primarily in the realms of diplomacy. Syria has proved itself an enduring state with a strong leadership allowing China to offer its BRI. According to several Chinese commentators, this is a strong indication of China's confidence in the Syrian State and its trust in the Syrian leadership, both necessary conditions for the success of a long-term project like BRI.
- Syria's importance to China stems from its strategic geographic location and its nonaligned foreign policy. Together, they guarantee the most reliable and effective “terminus node” in the

<sup>73</sup> China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “White Paper on China's New Geopolitical Strategy” published by Xinhua, Chinese News Agency on January 17, 2017.

<sup>74</sup> Zhixin Z, Working Paper, BCAS, Oct. 2018 Op.cit.

**“ Regardless of whether one is for or against China's BRI, two facts are undeniable. Firstly, this is a novel approach to international relations. It could change the way nations and people deal with one another. Secondly, this a unique opportunity for Syria to correct the injustices of the Sykes-Picot Agreement. ”**

Middle East and at the same time provide the BRI with transit venues overland and across the Mediterranean. Syria's interest in joining BRI is economic and strategic. Syria will benefit from China's participation in its reconstruction program and from its experience in rapid infrastructure development and economic growth. China is today Syria's most reliable ally with the financial, technological, human and organizational resources needed to rebuild the Syrian economy and circumvent US and Western sanctions.

- Having joined BRI, Syria can now combine its Four Seas Initiative with BRI's Five Seas Initiative to establish itself as the intersection of energy pipelines that link the energy sources in Arabia, the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, Iraq and Iran with markets in Europe. This network could eventually be extended to the Caspian and Black Seas to link with Central Asia, Eastern Europe and via the Red Sea to Africa. A similar plan was presented by President Assad during his visit to Turkey. The US and its allies regarded this economic nexus as a threat to their interests from the start. This threat furnished a reason to go to war against Syria.
- BRI is global in geographic scope, but its structure consists of regional bilateral and multilateral partnerships, aimed at promoting their mutual interests. Although the main emphasis is on its investment and trade dimension, a closer scrutiny suggest that its geostrategic and security dimensions are as important and necessary for its success and continuity. China regards BRI as mandatory to the future wellbeing of its people and the success of its Grand Strategy.
- States in Europe and the Pacific region, led by the US, have launched counter measures. China has responded by building up its military capabilities and political influence to defend BRI and ensure the safety of its economic corridors. By joining BRI, Syria has become part of China's Grand Strategy with mutual national security interests. In other words, the boundaries of China's national interests will eventually encompass all of Syria. Northern Syria is too important to both Syria and China to be left under the occupation of Turkey and the US. Syria, supported by China, has already embarked on a massive reconstruction program and on plans to modernize and augment its military capabilities.
- The extent of China's expansion of BRI's scope and geographic reach makes it unlikely that it will turn back. Having joined BRI, Syria cannot afford to withdraw either. The success and continuity of BRI is as important to Syria's national interests as it is to China's. The more developed China's BRI becomes in Syria, and the greater its economic and socio-political progress, the more interdependent the two countries become and the greater their common security interests.
- The struggle for the Middle East by the world's Great Powers has continued for centuries. The players and the means change but the strategic objectives remain as fixed as the region's geography. The main players in today's power game are the US and China. All others are peripheral auxiliaries. Several modifications to the traditional Great Powers' game accompany China's entry into the Middle East. Conceptually BRI is a new international economic and political strategy. China has repeatedly declared that its

approach to international relations is different from before as follows:

1. Its scope is global and is based on regional partnerships and cooperation rather than intervention.
  2. Its objectives are long-term and enduring rather than short term and opportunistic.
  3. It is based on interdependence rather than dependency.
- China's entry into Syria through its BRI is the major game changer, not only because of its size and scope but also because of the differing threats and opportunities it poses to various world and regional powers. The US and its NATO allies, already occupying parts of Syria, perceive it as a threat to their longstanding domination of the region. At the regional level, Turkey and Israel will abandon their policy of maintaining good relations with Russia and move towards the US position. The war in Ukraine has sent Russia two messages: that Syria, unlike Turkey and Israel, is their most reliable ally and that Mr. Putin's policy of being the friend of everyone in the region does not work. Russia, despite its alliance with China, will eventually regard BRI as a competitor.
  - The struggle for the Middle East in general, and the Levant in particular, is already under way in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Iran. The Russians are entrenched in Syria, the Americans and their NATO allies are in Iraq, northern Syria and to a much lesser extent in Northern Lebanon. That the major powers have avoided direct confrontation does not mean that they are inactive. Not only do they have an overt military presence, they are also fighting through a variety of mercenaries and auxiliaries who have received huge financial assistance and military equipment. Nevertheless, their military effectiveness has been negligible. In 1513, Niccolò Machiavelli described mercenaries as "useless and dangerous" as well as "disunited, thirsty for power, undisciplined and disloyal"<sup>75</sup>. Nothing has changed. Regardless of what these mercenaries are called or under what banner they fight and despite the destruction and human suffering they have imposed, they are unlikely to win as Machiavelli had concluded five hundred years ago.
  - The world is changing, as are the nature and modus operandi of relationships among and between people. Europe and later the US have dominated the world stage for centuries by using territorial expansion to build empires. Most of this territory was conquered quickly during the 18th and 19th Centuries and was "justified" by recourse to such concepts as "la mission civilisatrice", "ein Platz in der Sonne", "manifest destiny" and the "white man's burden".<sup>76</sup> Though much has changed during the last fifty years, the insistence of the West on maintaining world dominance continues, albeit under different pretexts and guises. China claims its expansion is different in both ends and means and is intended to bring peace and harmony to mankind.

75 Machiavelli n, *The Prince*, Chapter XII, "Military Organization and Mercenary Troops", London: Penguin Books: 2004 Pp. 51-57. Machiavelli is considered one of the most important writers on war and strategy.

76 Porter G., *Western Geopolitical Thought in the Twentieth Century*, London: Groom Holmes, 1985, P.2.



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