



China's Promise Of Full Support To Syria Might Be A Geopolitical Game-Changer

Description

CHINA/SYRIA: President Xi's telegraphed promise of full support to Syria after its latest elections could be a geopolitical game-changer if his rhetoric presages a new reality wherein the People's Republic assists its Arab counterpart with perfecting its tricky balancing act between various powers.

Syria's Balancing Act

Syria's been mired in a geopolitical dilemma for quite a few years already whereby it's been pressured by friendly and hostile powers alike to implement political reforms so as to advance its struggling peace process. This has taken the form of both of the Russian-written "draft constitution" of 2017 which was a much more gentle form of such pressure aimed at encouraging mutual compromises between all legitimate sides of the conflict as well as America's much more aggressive efforts to force Damascus into unilateral political concessions. Caught between these two rival parties that are in essence pushing for very similar structural outcomes, Syria cleverly deflected by comprehensively strengthening its relations with Iran so as to improve its strategic position and thus buy it more time until a possible breakthrough can occur.

Iranian Risks

The Iranian vector of Syrian grand strategy isn't without its challenges though since Russia and the US would both prefer for the Islamic Republic's military forces to leave the Arab one, albeit for different reasons, despite them being invited to legally operate there by Damascus. Russia envisions a prospectively dignified but phased Iranian withdrawal as providing the impetus for a larger series of diplomatic deals aimed at securing a long-term peace in West Asia whereas the US is always simply against the expansion of Iran's regional influence in principle. Both Great Powers are also allied with "[Israel](#)" to differing extents, which regards the Iranian military presence in neighboring Syria as a serious threat to its national security. Nevertheless, Syria remained loyal to Iran and refused to request its departure despite literally hundreds of "Israeli" bombings over the years.

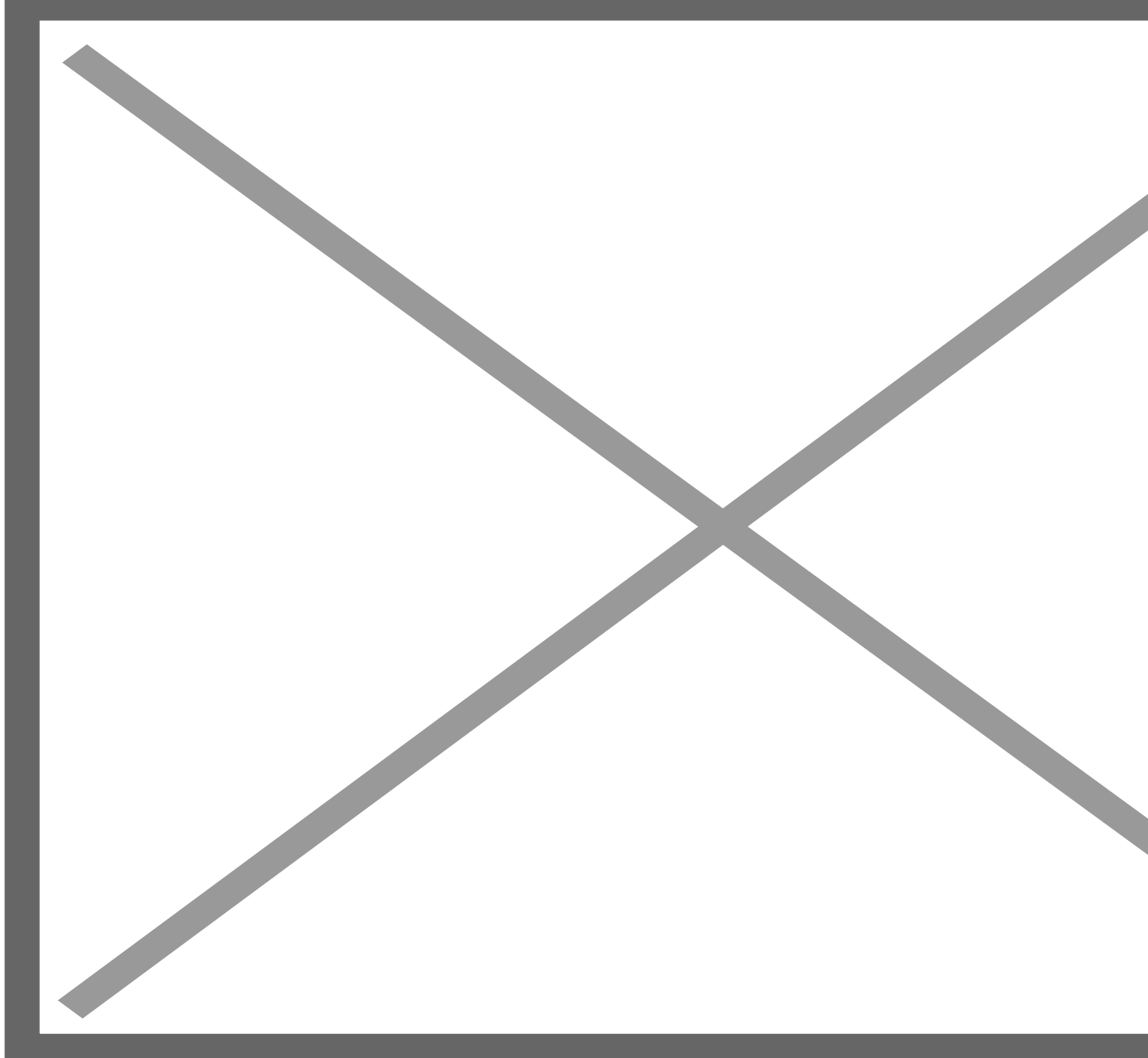
Background Reading

The background context is much more complex than described above, but intrepid readers can review the author's prior analyses on these complicated dynamics if they're interested in learning more about the particular details and dynamics:

- * 3 February 2017: "[Syria: Digging Into The Details Of The Russian-Written 'Draft Constitution'](#)"
- * 22 August 2018: "[Chaos Theory, Hybrid War, And The Future Of Syria](#)"
- * 3 February 2021: "[Korybko Interview With Iran's Farhikhtegan Newspaper](#)"
- * 7 February 2021: "[Syria Should Talk With The US Since Its Iranian & Russian Allies Are Already Doing So](#)"
- * 8 February 2021: "[Balancing Regional Interests In Syria Is The Only Way To Reach A Compromise Solution](#)"
- * 26 February 2021: "[Why Isn't Alt-Media Asking About The S-300s After Biden's Latest Strike In Syria?](#)"
- * 17 March 2021: "[Should Iran Be Worried About Russia's Coordination With 'Israel' & The US In Syria?](#)"
- * 25 May 2021: "[The Strategic Significance Of The Syrian Elections](#)"

To sum it all up, Syria basically seemed destined to inevitably implement some form of political concessions aimed at decentralization together with requesting Iran's dignified but phased withdrawal of the country in order to stand any serious chance at removing the US' unilateral sanctions and thus finally rebuilding.

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China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi

The Chinese Game-Changer

All the above-mentioned insight was relevant for years but might soon become outdated depending upon whether China's latest rhetoric presages a new reality. President Xi [promised](#) in the telegram that he sent to his Syrian counterpart after the latter's latest elections that the People's Republic "will provide all possible assistance...in revitalizing the country's economy and improving the lives of the population", among other things such as COVID-19 aid and enhancing bilateral relations. This was always an emerging scenario though one whose likelihood greatly increased over the past half-year as evidenced by the author's relevant analyses:

- * 13 November 2020: ["China's Belt & Road Initiative Can Help Syria Rebuild After The War"](#)
- * 15 December 2020: ["Korybko: Complementary Role Of Iran, China, Russia In Syria's Reconstruction"](#)
- * 4 April 2021: ["Korybko: 25-Year Deal Is A Message To The US: Iran & China Won't Be 'Contained'"](#)

In short, the recently clinched 25-year Chinese-Iranian Strategic Partnership enables the People's Republic to connect with the Islamic one via Pakistan by expanding the Belt & Road Initiative's flagship project of CPEC westward through the W-CPEC+ vision. This emerging corridor can then expand further westward to Syria. Furthermore, Iran's deeply entrenched influence and the unquestionable trust that its representatives have with their Syrian counterparts can open up important doors for China there. The end result is that Damascus might not have to implement any compromises if Beijing's BRI assistance helps reliably rebuild the country.

Strategic Consequences

Up until this point, Russia seemingly took it for granted that China wouldn't seriously invest in Syria anytime soon owing to the unresolved political-military situation there which could endanger its BRI projects. Nevertheless, the People's Republic apparently interpreted the latest elections' successful conclusion as a strong message to the world conveying the fact that everything in the Arab Republic is finally getting back on track enough that China can now consider more comprehensively investing there. Should that transpire as planned, then Russia's strategic leverage in Syria would comparatively decline as Damascus wouldn't have any incentive to carry out the compromises that Moscow's gently encouraged for the past few years, including the one related to requesting Iran's dignified but phased withdrawal from the country.

Russian Calculations

Russia's regional balancing act might therefore become comparatively less balanced if Moscow is no longer able to deliver on the grand diplomatic deals that it envisioned and presumably also at the very least intuited to its new partners like "Israel" and Turkey. In addition, Russia's previously dominant economic position in Syria might soon be challenged through China's "friendly competition" there. Syria of course stands to benefit by playing these two Great Powers off against one another in pursuit of the best reconstruction deals possible, but Russia might still be silently displeased at losing some of its strategic leverage over the country. Russia can always indirectly facilitate "Israel's" bombing campaigns against Iran to reduce the latter's influence there, but it can't do anything to counter China's. This observation suggests that the Kremlin's Syrian policy might soon change.

From "Monopolization" To "Accommodation"

Russia's "strategic culture" has a centuries-long tradition of influencing policymakers to "monopolize" the foreign regions in which they operate whereby Moscow becomes the unquestionably dominant power in those places. That started changing after the end of the Old Cold War, especially in areas where Russia used to hold the greatest sway. NATO's eastward march saw Russia begrudgingly "accommodating" the military bloc in Central & Eastern Europe while BRI's expansion into Central Asia

saw the Eurasian Great Power more enthusiastically do the same there with its top strategic partner. As a result of last year's Karabakh War, Russia was compelled to pragmatically "accommodate" Turkey in the South Caucasus, just as it's seemingly about to do with China in Syria, the crown jewel of Moscow's Mideast grand strategy, following President Xi's telegram.

The New Reality

The overarching trend is that Russia is flexibly adapting to the emerging Multipolar World Order, including in the evolving context of World War C, which resulted in it transitioning from its "monopolization" model to its newfound "accommodation" one. In the Syrian case, this will likely see Russia lessening some of the "friendly pressure" that it's previously put upon Damascus to implement Moscow's envisioned compromises, including the request for Iran to commence a dignified but phased withdrawal. The Eurasian Great Power might soon realize that Syria could simply replace it with China as the Arab Republic's preferred strategic partner, understanding that Moscow will militarily remain in the country as previously agreed but won't be economically rewarded with profitable reconstruction contracts if it doesn't fully "accommodate" Damascus related interests.

Concluding Thoughts

Provided that China carries through on President Xi's promise and that Iran hasn't already clinched a secret deal with the US to gradually withdraw from Syria as part of a larger compromise on its nuclear program (which doesn't seem too likely and would probably become impossible if principalists/conservatives win the upcoming elections later this month), then there's a very high chance that the geopolitical game has suddenly changed in Syria. Russian-Syrian relations will remain excellent, but their exact nature might somewhat change if Damascus more confidently plays the Chinese card to protect its political and military interests connected with its refusal to implement various compromises as well as request Iran's dignified but phased withdrawal. The US surely won't be happy with such a development, but there's little that it can realistically do to reverse this trend.

by Andrew KORYBKO

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