



ISSN: 2158-7051

INTERNATIONAL
JOURNAL OF
RUSSIAN STUDIES

ISSUE NO. 12 (2023/1)

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE INVOLVEMENT OF CHINA AND
RUSSIA IN SYRIA’S CRISIS: FROM A REALIST-CONSTRUCTIVIST
PERSPECTIVE**

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Summary

This paper, from a realist-constructivist perspective, compares the motivations, diplomatic policies and actions of China and Russia as parties that are economically, politically or militarily involved in addressing the Syria’s crisis. By drawing on the taxonomy of power, I argue that China and Russia respectively demonstrate structural and compulsory power when dealing with Syrian issue. They also cooperate with each other and maintain strategic partnership by virtue of institutional power and productive power, but the results are different. I also argue that the relations between China and Russia is influenced by both material power and identity structure. Finally, I conclude that as China and Russia continue developing their strategic relations and coordinating stances over regional and international issues, in the realm of diplomacy they are overwhelmingly on their own. Hopefully, as tension wanes and reconstruction starts in full swing, we can expect more cooperation, rather than confrontations.

Key Words: Syria, China, Russia, Taxonomy of power.

**Introduction: A Realist-constructivist Framework to compare the involvement of China and
Russia in Syria’s crisis**

March 15, 2021 marked the 10th anniversary of Syrian war, which began decade ago and has

resulted in over 388,000 people dead.^[1] For addressing this humanitarian catastrophe, as the UN estimated, the reconstruction will cost over \$300 billion.^[2] Actors involved in Syria, directly or indirectly, include the U.S., Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, Hezbollah, Israel, Sunni jihadist groups, Syrian Kurdish forces. Civil protests at the beginning of 2011 soon turned into armed conflict and a proxy war with participation of various countries and parties, including the Syrian Government with its allies (including Russia, Hezbollah and Iran), US-led Western countries, China, Sunni Arab rebel groups, Jihadist rebel groups and the Kurdish-led SDF.

As two of the significant players in Syrian issue, China and Russia have common stances over Syria: they insist on addressing the Syrian issue through political ways and dialogue, that the Syrian people have rights to determine their own destiny and the future of their country, that the political process should be inclusive and the political dialogue should be equal and open, that either the Syrian government or other parties and groups in Syria are committed to national reconciliation and unity, and that the international community should strengthen humanitarian assistance to Syria and neighboring countries. Because China and Russia opposed Western countries' imposed unilateral sanctions on al-Assad's government, there were critics condemning the two countries for their veto or abstention over the Syrian issue in the UN Security Council.

China's Syrian policy aims to maintain a constructive relationship with the government in Damascus that is stable and capable of preventing the spread of transnational jihadist activity from its territory; and to develop an economic partnership that is compatible with and in furtherance of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).^[3] Russia's actions were driven by the geopolitical perception that the collapse of the al-Assad regime could be prevented by intervening; and the view that alternative means (e.g., diplomacy) had proven futile.^[4] Beijing-Moscow cooperation in Syria has been promoted by shared opposition to a possible US-led regime change, antiterror and antiseparatist campaign, and their mutual supports in domestic and international affairs. "The partnership, however, is limited by divergent strategic interests in the Middle East region as well as the overall asymmetry of the relationship between Beijing and Moscow."^[5] Sino-Russian relations are influenced by both material power and identity structure. That is why they act independently to resolve the crisis, while continuing to strengthen the strategic partnership beyond the issue. I will compare and analyze individual and collective actions of China and Russia in Syria and their cooperation and disparities in general. This study cannot be completed unless we find a proper theoretical framework, because neither pure realism nor pure idealism can account for this complexity.

S. Barkin is the first scholar who tried to bridge the gap between realism and constructivism as two competing paradigms.^[6] Some scholars claim that the core of realist-constructivist theory is social construction of power politics with the impact of identity and norms on power politics.^[7] Realist constructivism, which tries to combine the explanations of power politics and social construction, can help to analyze the way how power structure and set of norms mutually affect each other in the international system. Realists-constructivists argue that ideas construct the structure of the international society through norms, while this process and effect of the construction is influenced by the power structure.^[8]

Although constructivism is opposed to define power as a material existence, it does focus on the role of power in social construction. Besides, the question of whether or not power can be transcended in international politics is at the core of the liberal-constructivism and realist-constructivism debate. Some experts even doubt if there should be realist-constructivism or constructivist realism.^[9] In this article I draw on the taxonomy of power to analyze policies of China and Russia toward Syria rather than indulge in theoretical debates. As Barkin argued, a specific

group that have been empowered by common ideas will at some point find that their goals are different, and at that time the element of power will show its importance. For the purpose of comparing policies and actions of states-actors and analyzing their relations, we clarify how states-actors draw on different forms of power to construct relations and to produce different results in international politics, how power in different ways affects the ability of actors and their fate, and how the power structure and sets of norms mutually influence each other. In this article, the core issue will be what kind of power China and Russia explore when intervening in Syrian crisis and on what kind of power structure the Sino-Russian relations are based in the context of great power competition.

Compared to traditional understanding of power, Barnett and Duvall define power as “the production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their circumstance”.^[10] Barnett and Duvall proposed four concepts of power: compulsory, institutional, structural, and productive. Compulsory power, based on realist thought, deploys direct material forces for the sake of the interests of one agent. Institutional power draws on formal and informal institutions to control others. Structural power focuses on structures that determining the positions of actors. Productive power deploys discourse and the systems of knowledge for forming identities, responsibilities and social capacities of social beings. The compulsory power and structural power work directly to the objects, while the other two function more diffusely. The four forms of power cannot be separated distinctly. They should be included in an integrated and complimentary framework for analyzing specific issues and the “power is assumed to take different forms under different sociopolitical circumstances”.^[11]

Drawing on the taxonomy of power from the realist-constructivist perspective, I compare the reasons, ways and consequences of the involvement of China and Russian in Syrian war, analyzing the so-called “China’s Plan” and Russia’s military actions in the region from historical and realist perspectives. I argue that China and Russia not only respectively implement structural and compulsory power in Syria, but also cooperate with each other by virtue of institutional and productive power. When vetoing Syrian resolution in UN Security Council, the two countries produced indirect influence over the conditions of socially distant others. Russia put great efforts to enhance its status in the Middle East by leading peace talks. China, in some sense, shifted focus “from particular actors that control, directly or indirectly, others to social relations of constitution”.^[12] They also implemented productive power by constructing discursive relations with relevant actors. Nevertheless, Pure material power or pure ideational construction cannot determine the way and direction of Sino-Russian relations in Syria or in general. Combining different distribution of material power and distribution of national identity can result in different types of international relations or structures. Beijing and Moscow remain different in the specific ways of addressing Syrian crisis. I finally conclude that China and Russia will continue to cooperate in resolving the crisis in Syria, especially by means of regional and international institutions. But while Beijing and Moscow are increasingly coordinating their stance over regional and international issues, in the realm of diplomacy they are overwhelmingly on their own. Hopefully, as tension wanes and reconstruction starts in full swing, more multilateral cooperation can be expected.

China’s Plan: Deployment of Structural Power

Structural power concerns the co-constitutive, internal relations of structural positions. It determines the social capacities and interests of the actors. State-actor exists only by virtue of its relations with others in structure. These actors are mutually constituted and are directly or internally

related; their interests are directly shaped by the social positions that they occupy, but they may not have equal privilege or status in the structure. There is, therefore, a core actor and a peripheral actor in the structure. China has been deploying structural power in Syria by committing to a non-interference policy, economic policy, participating in the post-war reconstruction, and engaging with all sides.

China's Plan is based on the historic origin and realist demands. Anciently, Beijing and Damascus began to develop bilateral ties during the "Silk Road" era, even in the pre-Christian times. China maintained close relationship with Hafez, al-Assad's father, as socialist allies during the Cold War. In reality, Syria is a vital node in the route of "One Belt and One Road" (OBOR). The Silk Road Economic Belt is designed to connect Asia, Europe and Africa, highlighting Syria's strategic position as the link between the continents. Beijing thinks highly of Syria's importance, since it means a lot for the political stability and security not only in the Middle East, but in China and neighboring areas. Beijing and Damascus hope that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and reconstruction in Syria will enable both sides to carry out more mutually beneficial cooperation in the fields of infrastructure, investment, energy, tourism, agriculture, transportation and so forth.^[13] The Chinese government sees cooperation with Syria as a main "handle" for it to participate in regional affairs. Moreover, Beijing has concerns about the potential threat of the Uyghur militants fighting alongside Syrian rebels in northern Syria.

First of all, the "China's Plan is guaranteed by economic cooperation. Beijing has been engaging with Damascus by means of "economic diplomacy"^[14] even during the turbulent time in the region, while sticking to non-interference policy in terms of internal affairs of other countries. As to the economic cooperation, China is the one who takes the initiative. In the middle of 2017 China officially expressed willingness to participate in Syria's post-war reconstruction. Since April of 2017 almost 30 Chinese entrepreneurs had visited Syria, including infrastructure giant China Energy Construction Group Co., Ltd. and China Construction Fifth Engineering Bureau, with the aim of discussing infrastructure projects with local provincial chief executives.^[15] In July of the same year Beijing held the first Trade Fair on Syrian Reconstruction Projects, during which officials pledged \$2 billion for rebuilding the country and expressed readiness to build an industrial park. About two hundred Chinese companies were present at the 60th Damascus International Fairs in September of 2018. The deals ranged from auto-manufacturing to mobile hospitals.

In addition, "China's Plan" also includes humanitarian assistance. During the recent years, China showered the Syrian regime with several in cash and in-kind grants, the latest of which was a financial aid with a value of \$14 million, as the total value of the awards amounted to 400 million Chinese Yuan (approximately \$60 million), including Covid-19 medical aids. The Chinese grant came in the framework of an economic and technical cooperation agreement that was signed by the Planning and International Cooperation Commission (PICC), which works under the supervision of the Syrian Prime Ministry, and the People's Republic of China.^[16]

Secondly, the "China's Plan" includes political arrangements. In 2016, the Chinese government appointed Xie Xiaoyan as the special envoy for Syrian affairs and sent a military delegation to Syria, demonstrating China's determination to play an independent role in mediating Syria's crisis. Meanwhile, Beijing has been maintaining close contacts with related parties. Since the end of 2017, Beijing has invited several delegations from both the government and the opposition parties to visit China. Beijing has also been actively participating in the process of peace talks. It became the only country engaging all Syrian parties – either governmental or oppositional.

From the realist-constructivist perspective, China chose to deploy structural power in Syria with the aim for constructing relations with the regional actors by means of economic diplomacy.

Their interests are directly shaped by the social positions that they occupy, which obviously are not equal in the structure. As the core actor in the structure, China has been playing an independent and decisive role. In the future, China's post-war engagement with Syria is likely to "center on shared strategic and economic interests"^[17], not just the priorities of humanitarian reconstruction.

Russia's Action: Deployment of Compulsory Power

Russia's choice is to conduct direct military actions in the form of compulsory power. Compulsory power shape directly actions or circumstances of another by deploying material resources to advance interests of one agent in opposition to the interests of others, reflecting realist thought. Russia have been exerting compulsory power since it sent military forces to Syria with the aim to change the circumstance and order in the country. This form of power might provoke conflicts. Russia's action did complicated the situation in the region, even if it is unintentionally.

When terrorism became another new threat in the region, Russia decided to formally send troops in September 2015. It was the first time that Russia sent troops abroad after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is also seen as a part of proxy wars between the U.S. and Russia, or a limited local conflict for fighting for influence in the region.^[18] The dispute between Moscow and Washington revolves around whether or not to protect Bashar al-Assad's regime, but Russia has its own concerns.

Historically, Syria has had good relations with the Soviet Union and Russia, while the ruling Arab Socialist Renaissance Party led successively by the senior and junior Assad has been pursuing a pro-Russia policy. Syria is Russia's last ally in this region. The Tartus Port, which is the second largest commercial port of Syria, is Russia's only remaining military base outside the former Soviet Union sphere. It gives Russian navy a direct access to the Mediterranean Sea. In reality, Russia and Syria also are important trading partners in the defense and energy industries. Russian companies have around \$20 billion invested in Syria, mainly in natural gas extraction. Syria is one of the top five foreign buyers of Russia's defense equipment.^[19] The arms sales contracts between them value above \$2 billion. Maintaining trade cooperation with Damascus can effectively alleviate the pressure of Western sanctions against Moscow. In terms of geo-security concerns, the reason why Russia initially and actively maintains involvement in the Syrian crisis is that Moscow is to be vigilant in stopping the permeation of terrorists from the Middle East through Central Asia and the South Caucasus to its own territories. Russia can also leverage Syria's geopolitical status to expand its own influence among Egypt, Turkey, Libya and other regional powers, and even threaten the southern flank of NATO, disabling US dominance. Most importantly, by participating in regional affairs, Moscow can prove that it remains a great power capable of resolving problems regionally and internationally, so as to ensure that it will not be isolated and marginalized in the future.

During a period of more than two years – from September 2015 to December 2017, when Putin announced the withdrawal of troops from Syria in cooperation with the Syrian government, Iran, Hizballah, and Shi'ite militia organizations; Russia dispatched more than 60,000 soldiers, combined with the newly established Aerospace Forces or VKS as the main forces. As a result, 87.5 thousand armed militants were destroyed, and more than 95% of Syrian territories were reclaimed. Moreover, by intervening in Syria's war, Russia has gotten a practical chance to test over 200 types of recently developed fighters (including the Soviet-57), a surface-to-air missile system, and fighters.^[20] Even after Moscow started withdrawing troops from Syria, in October of 2018, Russia supplied Syria, free of charge, S-300 long-range, fully-automatic anti-aircraft systems armed with

powerful missiles.^[21] In September 2019, the Defense Ministry of Russia announced that it is expanding the Hmeimim airbase in Syria and rebuilding a second landing strip to make the facility compatible for more aircraft. Furthermore, Russia was pursuing to cooperate with Turkey, Iran and other countries, indirectly competing with the United States and demonstrating its ability by solely conducting military actions and “integrating” different anti-American sides. Russia’s military involvement disrupted the American strategic plan in the region, put Washington’s credibility in doubt, and raised the issue of America’s future role in the post-conflict peacebuilding.^[22] It can be concluded, in some sense, that Russia’s compulsory power was deployed to the opposition of the interests of the West and the forces against Syrian government.

It should be worth noting that along with military actions, Russia has also been leading peace talks on Syria, paving the way for rejuvenation as a great power with global influence. This can be seen as a kind of institutional power. Also, it cannot be ignored that in 2013 Putin helped Syria avoid punitive air attacks and made the removal of Syrian chemical weapons possible. Most significantly, on January 30, 2018, accompanied by Iran and Turkey, Moscow convened a peace conference in Sochi, in which it participated with most political parties and groups involved with Syria but with the absence of the U.S., the UK and France.

Moscow’s recent efforts to promote peace in Syria were to play a coordinated role, including two talks between Putin and Erdogan respectively after the Turkish “Fountain of Peace” Operation in October 2019 and the “Spring Shield” in March 2020. Although Moscow moved into a leading role from a supporting role in Middle East affairs by conducting military actions and leading peace talks, it can hardly shake the US’s dominant position in the region. On October 13, 2019 the Trump administration announced withdrawal of about 1,000 troops from northern Syria, leaving the U.S.-backed and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to defend themselves. But the U.S. then announced deployment of new forces to protect the oil fields in eastern Syria and lands controlled by Syrian Kurdish fighters extending from Deir el-Zour to al-Hassakeh. Washington did not decrease the number of servicemen, nor did it allow Russia to dominate the region easily. This was confirmed by the airstrikes ordered by President Joe Biden in February of 2021 on the Iranian-backed militias.

In sum, Russia’s actions in Syria aim to promote its interests in “three concentric arenas”^[23]: Syria’s multi-layered conflict, Russia’s role in regional/Middle East dynamics, and Moscow’s broader conception of an evolving global order. But the West does not expect a rising Russia in the international arena and Russia’s action is limited by its weakness. “Its key foreign policy dilemma is the tension between its aspirations of retaining its Soviet-era geopolitical clout and its lack of ideological and economic tools to achieve that goal.” It hardly becomes a lethal challenge.^[24] Whatever manner Russia would take, hard or soft, appeal to military force or lead peace talks, deploy compulsory or institutional power, the standoff always remains. But China endorsed Russia’s efforts in addressing Syria’s crisis.

The Sino-Russian Cooperation in Syria: Deployment of Institutional Power and Productive Power

Realist constructivism allows us to effectively deal with morality in international relations,^[25] which can explain the reason why China and Russia reach a consensus on supporting al-Assad’s regime beyond basic realistic consideration and keep developing their relationship during the crisis. In a narrow sense, the two countries have been cooperating in resolving crisis by means of

institutional power and productive power; in the broad sense, they share common ideas and have been developing the strategic partnership based on realist-constructivist foundation.

Compared to compulsory power, institutional power control others in indirect ways through formal and informal institutions, and, finally, to generate unequal leverage in determining collective outcomes. In comparison with the direct relations that structural power produces, productive power generates more diffuse social process and concerns discourse and the systems of knowledge. Discourse constitutes identities, practices, rights, responsibilities and social capacities of social beings. In other words, productive power produces social identities and capacities as it gives meaning to them. The compulsory power and institutional power direct attention to maintaining control over others, but structural power and productive power shift the focus away from particular actors that control, directly or indirectly, others to social relations of constitution.^[26]

As aforementioned, Russia not only exerted compulsory power during the process of war in Syria, it also indirectly activated the involvement in this issue by leading the peace talks and cooperating with China in UN Security Council. The institutional power of the two countries is demonstrated in their indirect influence over the conditions of action of socially distant others, while they may not actually possess the institutions. When the United States was seeking to punish the Syrian government by authorization of the UN, China and Russia vetoed several Security Council draft resolutions over Syria, including resolutions to impose sanctions on Syria over chemical weapons use. Since 2011 Russia has used its veto right 17 times to protect the Damascus regime, while China has backed Moscow by vetoing resolutions six times. Neither Russia nor China participated in the “Friends of Syria” Conference and both voted against the UN Human Rights Council resolution on Syria. Many western countries condemned Beijing and Moscow for sheltering “despotic” al-Assad’s regime, which was accused of slaughtering tens of thousands of innocent civilians.

China and Russia also try to generate productive power in Syria. By constructing discursive relations with most actors involved in the issue, strengthening economic and political contacts with Syrian government and enterprises, and mediating among countries in the region, China has been expanding productive power for its own purpose. In doing so, it directs attention to the underlying social relations that make possible an assumption of a “rising power”, give meaning to China’s foreign policy practices. Russia also injected productive power in Syria by constituting religious discourse.^[27] For instance, Russia’s powerful Orthodox Church voiced support for Moscow’s decision to carry out air strikes in Syria against the IS, calling it a “holy war”.^[28] It also provided humanitarian assistance to the Christians suffering from the crisis. It is noteworthy that although both Beijing and Moscow call on expanding humanitarian aid to Syria, they have different points in the ways to deliver aid — the former prefers cross-line relief, while the latter insists on cross-border modality.

From the realist-constructivist perspective, China and Russia maintain the strategic partnership by constructing relations based on material interests and common ideas. Economically, both Russia and China have profitable trade ties with Syria. As aforementioned, Russia is one of Syria’s most important arms suppliers. Experts believe that the increased demand for Russian arms and military equipment is quite logical, especially following its victory in Syria over Daesh (ISIS/ISIL), the largest terrorist organization in the world.^[29] China was ranked as Syria's third-largest importer in 2010 and the largest in 2017. 80% of Syrian imports are from China, mainly consumer goods, electrical appliances, mechanical and electrical equipment.^[30] From January to November, 2019, the total value of China's imports and exports from Syria was about \$1.2 billion, increasing by 3.7% compared with the same period of the previous year.^[31]

Politically and ideologically, both Beijing and Moscow have been developing friendly relations with Damascus since the period of Hafez, Bashar al-Assad's father. Neither of them believes that regime change can bring real stability and prosperity, nor do they expect the same scenario repeated in their countries. Moreover, as Syria holds a hostile attitude towards Washington, Russia is committed to blocking American efforts to shape the region and China prefers to "wait and see" rather than siding with either al-Assad or the opposition, opposing unilateral actions of any sides. Against the backdrop of deterioration of relations with Washington, as permanent members of the UN Security Council, Beijing and Moscow believe that a closer and stronger partnership is set to boycott the US-led campaign.

The cooperation in Syria in turn helped to promote the Sino-Russian relations to a new high, even against the backdrop of the Ukrainian crisis and Covid-19 pandemic. Over the years China and Russia, as the world's major economies and emerging markets, have been deepening pragmatic cooperation in various fields. They respectively push forward the BRI and the Strategy of Greater Eurasian Partnership with the prospect for broader regional economic cooperation. This justified a record bilateral trade of more than \$146.8 billion in 2021 and many strategic projects in traditional fields of energy, infrastructures, and prospective cooperation in agriculture, finance, science and technology, and e-commerce. The accomplishments also include the LNG project from Russia's Yamal Peninsula in the Arctic to China, the commercial operation of the second line of the China-Russia oil pipeline in 2018, the operation of the east natural gas pipeline in 2019, and the completion of the Tongjiang railway bridge and Heihe highway bridge in the same year.

The Western world fears that China and Russia might form a quasi-alliance^[32] in the context of complicating a China-U.S.-Russia trilateral relationship, since Chinese military forces participated in Russian drills successively in 2018 and 2019, upgrading military cooperation with Russia. Officially, both sides insistently denied the possibility of forming alliance, as Russian scholars previously claimed that Moscow and Beijing are not going to form a tandem, but their strengthened partnership was profoundly manifested in the cooperation in addressing Syrian crisis.^[33]

2021 marked the 20th anniversary of China-Russia Treaty of Good-neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation, but this cannot cover up the problems facing the bilateral mechanism. Given the different goals set by the two countries for the new era, the mechanism might be overidealized and lacks sufficient binding force, meanwhile there remains disparity between the governments and societies.^[34] While Russia is pursuing a more revisionist approach in Europe and Eurasia with interests in continued economic growth and stability in Asia-Pacific mostly paralleling those of the U.S., China may not be willing to indulge into an all-out conflict, but to "build its deterrence capabilities by deftly employing a mix of its conventional defensive and active defense approaches".^[35]

Disparities in Involvement of China and Russia: Power Politics Still Matters

As Barkin claimed, "even if all actors in the international system at a given point in time accept the same basic set of normative structures, they will differ in their interpretations of those structures, whether for rationally self-interested reasons or for psychological reasons".^[36] When interpretations or understandings differ, the power becomes important and dominated in the structure of relations. Henry R. Nau, who used realist constructivism to analyze the American diplomatic strategy and pointed out that identity or ideas and material power together construct the national interests of the U.S. and their actions abroad, also argued that combining different

distribution of material power and distribution of national identity can result in different types of international relations or structures.^[37] Although China and Russia can maintain comprehensive partnership thanks to the common ideas and stances, either in the war or in the postwar reconstruction in Syria, their foreign policy practices show self-interested particularity and the results are different. In other words, even if Beijing and Moscow share common ideas in some issues, power politics still matters. Power “is always present and implicated in any social formation... and is assumed to take different forms under different sociopolitical circumstances”.^[38] For all the rhetoric about shared values and common worldviews, the Sino-Russian partnership is based on a sober appreciation of the two sides’ respective national interests and their own distinct agenda. Besides, the impact of the partnership of a rising China and a resurging Russia on global order has been peripheral.^[39] In my view, the power politics influencing Sino-Russian relations is reflected in four aspects:

First and most importantly, there exists gap between China and Russia in terms of economic strength and international status. In 1989, the Soviet economy was twice the size of China’s; in 2020, China’s per capita GDP surpassed Russian for the first time. In 2021, Russia’s GDP is less than that of China’s Guangdong province and of Jiangsu province. Russia’s economy is heavily dependent on energy exports, with high-tech products accounting for only 11% of its manufactured exports. China’s economy has experienced dramatic growth in the last few decades since Beijing started a program of economic reforms in 1978. Now China has become the world’s second largest economy with obviously prominent political influence in the world arena. Complementary limits and dependency cannot support the long-term needs of both countries to balance development, even though the “declining powers merit as much diplomatic attention as rising ones do”.^[40] As a rising, if not aggressive, power, China is becoming an attractive country to investors from around the world. As a developing, if not revisionist, country, Russia expends its efforts to regain the previous international status that the Soviet Union had previously when losing attractiveness to most of CIS countries. As the bilateral economic connections strengthen, Russia’s junior status will become more of a liability and the partnership will become even more unequal,^[41] especially after Russian economy suffered a big loss due the Western sanctions and the coronavirus pandemic.

Secondly, Russia has relatively high stakes in involvement in Syria. Although both China and Russia are concerned about the potential security threat in case Syria’s crisis gets out of control and thousands of fleeing militants threaten their borders, Russia is facing more serious terrorist threats than China. It is the target of international terrorism despite increasing counterterrorism actions. Russian security services identified 2,000 Russian nationals who are relatives of militants in the Middle East and could try to return to Russia, posing a terrorist threat to the domestic security of Russia.^[42] Meanwhile, China has benefitted from its strict security measures, mass surveillance tactics and so-called “reeducation” campaign for Uyghur and other Muslim minorities across the country. Beijing is also cooperating with Damascus in countering terrorism.^[43] This explained in part the reason why China allegedly sent units of Special Forces, known as “Tigers of Siberia” and “Night Tigers” to Syria in 2018. The official announcement confirmed the goal is to counter terrorism of the Islamic East Turkistan Movement in the suburb of Damascus. In the same year, Uyghur-perpetrated violence in China fell to the lowest level since 2008.^[44]

In addition, compared to the big trade and security concerns of Russia in Syria, China does not have too many indispensable interests in that country. Syria is located thousands of miles away, and the bilateral trade was based mostly on exports from China to Syria. In 2021, China-Syria bilateral trade was about \$446 million,^[45] accounting for a minor proportion of China’s overall foreign trade. Russia-Syria bilateral trade of 2021 was \$607 million. Meanwhile, China’s imports

from Syria were only \$1.19 million, almost without oil or gas products, underlining the fact “that goods imported from Syria play virtually no role in China’s economy”^[46]; while Russia imported \$12.4 million products from Damascus and exported more varied goods to Syria,^[47] including weapons and nuclear reactors with the aim to help the latter to rebuild and develop the oil and gas fields. The educational or cultural exchange between Beijing and Damascus are less impressive. Few Chinese laborers or immigrants work and live in Syria, and the investment from China will not increase quickly, only if the situation is stable.

Thirdly, both China and Russia deploy institutional power and productive power in Syria, they differ in specific ways. Russia has been pursuing the initiative in leading the peace talks, while China just played a relatively supportive role. Beijing sees the involvement as a “diplomatic trial balloon” to seize a unique opportunity to broaden its experience with multilateral global crisis management and conflict mediation,^[48] while Russia is ambitious to reclaim its regional dominance and international status. The same difference exists in terms of the deployment of productive power. China focuses on producing meaning through discourses. Here discourses do not mean dialogues among specific actors. This concept refers to sites of social relations of power that situate ordinary practices of life. That is why Beijing was willing to activate communications with Syrian entrepreneurs and local authorities and provide humanitarian aids to Syrian people. Beijing and Damascus even signed various memorandums of understanding, including to cover repairing and protecting Syrian heritage sites and exhibit Chinese products in Syria.^[49] In contrast, Russia deployed productive power in a limited circle. As aforementioned, Moscow gave religious meaning to military actions in Syria. Meanwhile, Russia and the U.S. launched an information war against each other. Against the backdrop of deterioration of bilateral relations, Moscow and Washington unleashed propagandistic attacks in terms of Syrian issue, using social media to shape the strategic landscape and accusing the other side of aggravating situation. As a result, “Russia’s relationship with Western powers has become increasingly strained because of the intervention, not improving as Putin had hoped”.^[50]

Finally, the diplomatic circumstances of China and Russia and their relations with the West are different. China maintains good relations with almost all the countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia and Israel as American allies, whose relations with Syria are assessed as hostile. Beijing is trying to keep a neutral stance or act as a temporizer to avoid direct confrontations with the West in the Middle East, although its current relations with the U.S. had fallen to the bottom. “Moscow has managed to break out of its post-2014 international isolation by actively developing its Middle Eastern policy (through military intervention in Syria) and by intensifying relations with China and Asia” since 2015.^[51] Russia struggled with its “balanced policy” in the Middle East as it has priorities for certain allies.^[52] Obviously, Russia’s intervention in Syria put the U.S. in an awkward situation, therefore Washington is trying to enhance the pressure and make the conflict a “quagmire” for Russia. But confrontation with the U.S. in Syria is not on China’s agenda, although their relations have been deteriorating in Asia-Pacific. Committing to a “low-profile role”^[52] or compulsory engagement, pursuing practical interests or honorable dominance – these are the different diplomatic choices and strategies of China and Russia. Further, this imbalance of the trilateral relations structure will, apparently, influence the future situation in the Middle East.

Conclusion

Realist constructivism can “study the relationship between normative structures, the carries of political morality, and use of power”.^[53] From realist-constructivist perspective, I compare the involvement of China and Russia in Syria’s crisis in the context of Sino-Russian relationship structure, drawing on the taxonomy of power, because this conception relates to the agent-structure duality for analyzing the relationship between social context and individual actions. In this study, the different conceptualizations of power, which are intertwined and give multiple explanation for the circumstances and actions of China and Russia in Syria, capture the different ways in which Sino-Russian relations shape and limit the countries’ ability to determine their fates. I also explain the reason China and Russia act either unanimously or differently for addressing the crisis when their strategic partnership keeps developing.

China and Russia employ different approaches to be involved in Syria’s crisis. Beijing, focusing on economic and diplomatic needs, has limited interests in this term and plays a flexible and secondary role, so its impact is limited, too. Moscow’s concerns, by contrast, mostly focus on geopolitics of energy and national security. Russia has more stakes in Syria than China does. As I observed, the main difference is that for Beijing, Syria is a new window for promoting BRI project, while Moscow sees Damascus as the last fortress against the Islamic extremist threat. It means that China, to some extent, has more leeway, while Russia has to gamble on an all-or-nothing policy. That explains in part the reason why China and Russia respectively deployed structural power and compulsory power in Syria. But this disparity did not impede their cooperation in the frame of deployment of institutional power and productive power in Syria, as well as the effective development of Sino-Russian strategic partnership in a general sense.

Although the Syrian government welcomes Beijing and Moscow to participate in post-war reconstruction, while excluding the involvement of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Western countries, the challenge remains. China is expanding presence in the Middle East and places Syria as a strategic target for its desired sphere of influence, while relations with the United States amid the coronavirus pandemic are growing worse. In the scalene triangle structure of China-U.S.-Russia relations, China “has a card to play”.^[54] Moscow is also activating its role in the region: sent big delegation to Syria in September of 2020 for promoting economic cooperation; supported Syrian government forces in fierce fighting with opposition forces backed by Turkey in Idlib; expanded its navy base at Tartus port and planned to construct a floating dock to boost the port’s ship repair facilities; stopped and even turned back a U.S. convoy in Syria as friction grows between Moscow and Washington. Moscow will continue its balancing act of competing with contending actors in the region.^[55]

In conclusion, from the realist-constructivist perspective, or, in the framework of social construction of power politics, the common ideas on regional and world order help to promote part of the cooperation between China and Russia in Syria and the development of Sino-Russian strategic partnership in general. But due to the disparities in deployed forms of power, they differ in the ways to address the crisis. Sino-Russian cooperation in addressing Syrian crisis, mainly in the form of supporting al-Assad’s regime and vetoing resolutions on sanctions against Damascus, in the eyes of the Western world, complicated and even worsen the situation. The roles of China and Russia in Syria, however, need to be assessed in a long run, especially in the post-crisis period, so do the Sino-Russian partnership itself.

Instability and sporadic fights might persist in Syria for a long term. Under such circumstances, China and Russia are expected to develop a new quality of partnership and with the spirit of multilateralism, which might begin with cooperation on some of the issues that have been

badly neglected by the US-led post-Cold War order, such as climate change and global poverty.^[56] The pandemic and Russia-Ukraine conflict might give another chance for Beijing and Moscow to test their relations. Hopefully, as the tensions wane and reconstruction starts in full swing, we can expect more multilateral cooperation, rather than confrontations.

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