



The Syrian crisis and impact on Chinese soft power in the Arab region

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Abstract

The beginning of the outbreak of the Syrian crisis coincided with the decision of the US government to withdraw from Iraq in 2011, which was considered an indicator of the US administration's tendencies to withdraw from the Middle East and move towards the Pacific Ocean and the China Sea in light of international competition with China, which threatens to create a regional and international vacuum in the most important strategic region in the world, and as a result, tensions escalated in the region for dominance and influence between its poles, which may turn it into a volcano that may explode at any moment.

China found in this withdrawal a great opportunity presented by the American administration on a plate, to strengthen its influence in this vital region of the world, which it aspires to reach in order to secure energy sources as well as ensure a market for the discharge of its products, and the location of this region is in line with China's orientations and its quest to be a major player in the international system by working to change the balance of power with some of its allies and reduce American influence at least in this important region of the world.

China felt that its economic interests became threatened after the so-called Arab Spring and the change of governments with which it had alliances and strategic relations, and governments with loyalties to the United States and Western countries came to the fore and began to exclude Chinese and Russian companies from participating in the reconstruction of these countries, especially in Libya and Egypt.

At that time, the Syrian crisis was looming on the horizon and foreshadowing new directions for the region and the siege of the remaining Russian and Chinese interests by the United States and its Western allies and some countries in the region that have strategic alliances with the United States stretching for dozens of years, and thus this picture posed a great challenge to those two countries (Russia – China).

Hence, a new era of Chinese strategy is taking shape in the Middle East region in general and in the Arab region in particular in light of the complexities and overlapping of interests in the Syrian crisis between local and regional players as well as international players.

Keywords: Syrian crisis, American administration, economic interests, economic interests

Introduction

The change of American focus from the Middle East to the Pacific Ocean and the China Sea has created a regional vacuum that has prompted some regional governments to try to fill it in light of regional competition for influence and dominance in this strategic region of the world, and this change coincided with the beginning of the outbreak of the crisis in Syria, and this trend is consistent with China's strategic goals, which sees the recent American trends as a direct threat to its national security, so China has played an international role commensurate with its growing economic power reinforced by a huge military force through which it can compete with the great powers in order to prove that status.

Syria was the elected station for activating the Chinese strategy in this region, which coincided with the direct involvement of the United States and its allies in supporting the Syrian opposition against the government in an attempt to overthrow it and remove Russia and China from this region and singularity with its allies by controlling energy sources and the consumer market and preventing China from expanding in the Arab region with significant growth of its exports at the expense of the American economy, so China resorted to another tactic without directly entering into conflict with the United States and its allies in Syria.

In light of the above, this study attempts to address the issue

of Chinese soft power in the Arab region by exploiting the Syrian crisis and using it to weave strategic relations between its parties, especially since the Gulf countries were divided in that conflict and have enormous potential from energy sources and a large surplus of foreign currencies, and China found in Russia an ally this study poses important considerations about the dynamics of China's presence in the Middle East and how researchers should study it.

The problem of studying

This study is looking China's ability to compete with the great countries in the Middle East region in general and the Arab region in particular by using its relations with the conflicting and overlapping regional parties in the Syrian crisis through its use of soft power and exploiting the lack of success of the conflicting forces in achieving their goals, which is what China succeeded at the expense of the great powers.

1. How did China manage to use its soft power tools to bring about changes in the structure of politics in the Arab region under the circumstances of the Syrian crisis?
2. Does China have the ability to use soft power by using the necessary tools and investing them in the Arab region, and can it balance its growing interests with its desire to remain neutral in international crises?

3. What is the role that Chinese soft power can play in keeping abreast of developments in the Middle East and the Arabian Gulf, taking advantage of the Syrian crisis?

Objectives of the study

1. The importance of familiarizing yourself with the tools of Chinese soft power.
2. To identify the importance and capabilities of the Arab region, with which China seeks to employ soft power in order to achieve its goals.
3. Analyze and assess the implications of China's ability to implement its strategies in the Arab region.

The importance of studying

1. The importance of the study lies in the importance of the Arab region in the Chinese perception through the soft and strategic policy pursued by China and drawing the features of an economic partnership that would enable it to balance the international decision at least in this important region of the world.
2. Its importance also lies in China's ability to use soft power to bring about a shift in the balance of economic power other than the interests of the United States and adopt a soft balance strategy at an escalating pace in the face of Washington, which is reflected in its ability to use non-military tools to neutralize the US moves through the exploitation of international organizations as well as the use of its economic power at the same pace.

Study hypotheses

1. The Chinese position on the Syrian crisis can be adjusted so that it harmonizes with the rhythm of the soft balance in the face of Washington's interests in the region.
2. The use of soft power in a manner consistent with the importance of the Chinese role in this crisis, which is one of the economic and political perceptions of China in the Arab region.

Study methodology

In this study, used the descriptive method as well as the analytical method by using some Arabic and foreign sources and references available in libraries and electronic information databases, and then trying to extrapolate some results by analyzing the opinions, statements, and statements of some authors in this regard to conduct the requirements of the practical part of this study.

The Syrian crisis

The signs of the outbreak of the Syrian crisis began at the end of January 2011, the year the United States decided to withdraw its military forces from Iraq, and its beginnings were in the form of peaceful protests, launched from the revival of Daraa province in the south of the country and adjacent to the Jordanian border ^[1].

These protests have broken out throughout Syria, except in some Alawite areas, knowing that they were not the result of the moment, but are the result of many internal and accumulated factors, some of which are political and others economic, and the social factor has not been lost, in addition to the external factor ^[2], Then these protests developed a short time later and began to take another turn and raise slogans demanding the overthrow of the regime, as a result

of which the authorities arrested a group of students, followed by massive demonstrations across Syrian cities, then called dignity Friday, and that was on the eighteenth of March of the year 2011 ^[3], and many sources are confirming that the signs of the real crisis between the regime and the demonstrators were on the fifteenth of March of the year 2011 when the regime forces intervened to disperse the sit-in by force ^[4]. The protest movements turned into sit-ins and then developed into violent armed confrontations between the regime and some protesters, especially in areas considered by the regime as a red line, including the areas of Tartus and Latakia, which the regime tried to end the protests through the use of excessive force from the beginning, but things took a different turn in the confrontations between the protesters and the regime's pillars ^[5].

Hence, it can be seen that the Syrian crisis has begun to overlap and complicate a lot since its first beginning, as it was formed from several parties that are struggling with each other like a miniature Third World War, and each party consists of three axes (internal-regional – The First party consists of the regime, the security establishment, members of the Syrian Baath Party and the majority of the Alawite sect, and it receives regional support from Iran, Hezbollah and some Iraqi as well as Afghan armed factions, and it also receives international support from Russia and China, which are the mainstays of this support, and their allies Brazil, South Africa and India, either the second party, which represents the opposition and consists of the Syrian National Coalition, the Free Army and some armed factions and militias such as (Jabhat al-Nusra – The third group is the international group that supports the Syrian Democratic Forces Front (SDF), which consists of a group of ethnicities and religions of militias that are predominantly Kurdish and allied with some Arab militias and receive support from the United States of America and Western countries, and all these parties are struggling among themselves, and each party seeks to gain new territories and impose its control over them in order to influence the regional balance of power as well as influence international balances ^[6].

The ambiguity and complexity continued to cast a shadow on the field reality on the ground in terms of the raging conflict between the parties(Iran and its allies on the one hand), and between (Turkey and its allies on the other hand), and then moved to an international conflict between the United States and Western countries on the one hand, and between Russia and China on the other, and so the crisis turned into a proxy war between the great powers, which portends the aggravation of the crisis as well as the difficulty of reaching realistic solutions.

Chinese soft power and its goals

The escalation of the conflict and competition between the United States and China, especially in the Arab region, made China think about investing its soft power in areas of dominance and influence of the United States and vital and strategic areas of the world and using this power to achieve its goals and agencies ^[7].

1. Soft power means the ability to get the best results by attraction instead of coercion or payment, which is the main goal of every country in arranging its external relations. Moreover, in our digital world with value and long supply chains, the image of a country or company is often perceived as representing a country, and it is

the one that attracts talents, promising hearts, and investments, which may constitute an opportunity to sell its products. therefore, soft power is seen from a geopolitical point of view as a battle to win hearts and minds, which is no less important than the development of a military arsenal with the latest technologies. China has succeeded in becoming a superpower that surpasses its counterpart from major countries with soft power so that it has become inspiring leaders and citizens at the same time and influencing them all over the world, and thus it will have an influential role in the balance of international power^[8].

2. China is facing the challenge of an aging population accompanied by a decline in the labor force, as is the case with many European countries, and to defuse this phenomenon, it must open up to the rest of the world, according to China's official census data, as of 2020, the Chinese population growth has begun to decline while the number of people over the age of 65 is increasing^[9].
3. China relies in its economy on international markets, as the Chinese economy does not currently enjoy self – sufficiency and this will not be achieved in the near future, despite the new economic model adopted by China (dual trading), which has its roots in the Fourteenth five-year plan (2021-2025), and accordingly, China needs markets for the disposal of its products as well as the international finance market for its development, and the Chinese export industry is the most important economic pillars in the country, and it has exported products worth more than (2591), a billion dollars, which is twice what the United States exported (1432) billion dollars or Germany (1380) billion dollars^[10,11].
4. In light of the competition between China and its neighbor India, India may surpass India in population or be the largest economic market in the future instead of China, and according to development indicators, the Human Development Index is likely to remain ahead of China's regional rival shortly, as the tensions that occur between the two countries from time to time showed that both take each other's threats seriously in all respects, whether economic, political or military, due to India's involvement in partnerships that China sometimes considers hostile to it^[12].

Chinese soft power in the Arab region

Energy and investments are one of the most important and central axes in Chinese relations with the countries of the Middle East, especially Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Saudi Arabia is China's largest trading partner in West Asia for the 13th year, respectively. The kingdom is seeking to develop its infrastructure with the participation of Chinese companies as well as expand its investments to become the first in the region. China also has cultural and historical ties with Iran, and oil has become the main material for this relationship, offset by trade cooperation and arms deals, and China is trying through its international weight to contribute to solving the crisis of the Iranian nuclear program To open the way for it to expand its investments and complete the Silk Road project to the rest of the region through Iran, known in Chinese foreign policy, it proceeds from the interests of its people and the peoples of the world, and its external goal is focused on resisting

Western domination and uniqueness in international decisions as well as maintaining world peace.among its external goals, it also does not seek hegemony and does not ally with the major countries that are looking for this goal, but rather seeks to develop the horizon of participation and cooperation and strives to establish a just and acceptable economic and political system at the international level, so that this system guarantees the interests without interfering in the internal affairs of other countries^[13].

Hence, we find that China is affected by the extent of its need for energy sources, and China has had its supplies of these energy sources since the seventies of the last century, and since then its foreign interests have become increasing, as well as seeking to increase its cross-border investments, especially in the Middle East dominated by the United States with the rejection of most of the leaders and peoples of the region to continue the rapid economic progress that the country is witnessing^[14].

It has been noted in recent years that it has expanded its imports from the sources it obtains from crude oil despite the significant rise in its prices, and since 2020, China has become the largest importer of crude oil in the world by more than 10.3 million barrels per day^[15].

From the above, the researcher concludes that the increasing need for Chinese raw materials to support its growing industrial sector has made relations with developing countries inevitable due to the availability of those materials in these countries and this makes them play a strategic role in Chinese diplomacy. The need to develop relations with these countries, including the Islamic world, is inevitable, because many of them have huge reserves of oil and gas, and China's great demand for natural resources, especially energy resources, makes the relationship dynamic with the Islamic world and those relations developed very quickly amid the doubts of the West about the possibility of continuing this relationship.

It is logical here to discuss soft power, diplomacy, and Chinese investment in the Islamic world, including the Middle East countries, given the fact that Western countries on the one hand practice an ideological approach in their diplomacy with those countries, while China tends to soft power in this, and that these different approaches adopted by the West and China in dealing with countries are one of the most important reasons why Chinese diplomacy contributes significantly to current and future international relations.

The use of soft power in a crisis

There are political and strategic reasons related to China's desire to send a message to the United States confirming its ability to expand and fill the vacuum suffered by the American administration in the Middle East, and this position supports China's strategic relations with Iran, which has the upper hand in Syria and Iraq, and is one of the main players in the Syrian crisis, and China's intervention in the Syrian crisis and its political initiatives to achieve a peaceful solution to the crisis does not mean that the government China also wanted to convey a message to the United States of America about removing the name of the Turkestan Islamic party from the list of terrorism and exploiting the file of Uyghur Muslims in order to put pressure on China and weaken its role, and China also wanted to convey a message to Russia and the United States that it is a major player that has all the possibilities that can change the

situation in the region if ignored or harm its vital interests in this strategic region of the world ^[16].

Here, the Chinese position on the transformations and events taking place in the Arab region after the emergence of the so-called Arab Spring revolutions emphasizes the need for Beijing to present itself as a new player in the Middle East in line with its vital and growing interests, especially about oil, manufacturing industries and natural gas, and there is a desire for China to play a political and diplomatic role commensurate with its economic and military capabilities in light of its relations and alliances with regional or international powers alike ^[17].

China is also committed to developing its role in the Arab region in line with the changes brought about by the so-called revolutions (the Arab Spring) and at all periods, the Chinese administration rejected all forms of external interference in the internal affairs of countries and repel attempts to undermine their regimes, as is the case in Syria, considering that this external intervention to change the regime, She also believes that the revolution in Syria has turned into an armed conflict and a war against the Syrian state, so the Syrian crisis must be resolved through political dialogue between the conflicting parties and under the auspices of the international organization, stressing at the same time the need to respect the sovereignty and independence of Syria, preserve its territorial integrity and territorial integrity and work to stop the violence inside Syria ^[18].

Since China believes in the need to resolve the Syrian crisis through political dialogue between the parties to the crisis under the umbrella of the United Nations, however, it does not trust the American role in the region in general and the Syrian crisis in particular, and it openly accuses Washington of seeking not only to impose its control over Syria but also over most of the Middle East, so China used its veto power in the Security Council to cancel American resolutions that Washington is trying through the International Organization to undermine and weaken the Syrian regime so that the opposition can overthrow it, and China justifies that those resolutions contradict the principle of respecting the sovereignty of states and its internal affairs ^[19].

Therefore, China rejects any external interference in those revolutions because it is considered interference in the internal affairs of those countries, and from this point of view, the Chinese leadership has strengthened its economic and diplomatic relations with Syria, which the West accuses of violating human rights, and that the United States uses economic sanctions as a pressure card on the Syrian regime and prevents it from achieving its goals in ending the crisis, and the use of this paper may prolong the conflict and turn Syria into an international conflict zone between the West and China, which complicates the Syrian crisis ^[20].

The international developments that have taken place in the Middle East region, especially after the events that hit the world after the eleventh of September 2001, and the subsequent developments, such as many popular revolutions witnessed by some Arab countries, have increased the chances of Chinese intervention in the equation of conflict in the region, and the collapse of security in this region poses a direct threat to Chinese national security and not only to China's economic interests and serious security transformations in the Middle East ^[21].

From the above, we can understand China's conservative position towards the Middle East, which is to defend the

policy of non-interference in the affairs of the region and emphasize China's foreign policy to retreat from areas of sustainable conflicts and intense rivalries and work to achieve the benefit of Chinese society, in addition to the Chinese government's desire to play a greater role as a superpower with influence and ability to participate in the broad outlines of international relations and the world order. China's position throughout the years of the crisis, represented by its opposition position within the UN Security Council, has been characterized by non-interference in the internal affairs of countries, including Syria, as it opposed international resolutions that are initiated within the council to overthrow the political regime in Syria, and this firm position in rejecting any external interference in order to overthrow the political regimes of any country, despite the absence of a military presence or political presence, even at the economic level in Syria, therefore China's presence and exercise of its role in this crisis is characterized by extreme caution in taking its steps in opposition to Western trends ^[22].

As is known, China does not have any political or military presence on Syrian territory, but it has exercised its role with great caution, and this role comes in line with the directions of its foreign policy, which seeks to present itself as a reliable alternative party to ensure security, stability and balance in the Middle East region, especially as it enjoys good relations with Iran and the Arab Gulf states, which are wrestling with each other by proxy on Syrian territory, and through this relationship, it has sought with the parties to change the idea of overthrowing the regime and putting forward a Initiative that can lead to more acceptable outputs from resolving the situation in order to reach a peaceful solution that satisfies the conflicting parties, and this initiative included respect for the sovereignty of Syria with the need to restore In addition to combating terrorist and extremist organizations listed on the UN Security Council list and moving towards achieving a comprehensive political solution to the Syrian crisis ^[23].

China continued to call on the United Nations to find a comprehensive political solution to the Syrian crisis, and there is a Syrian welcome for the Chinese initiative, and the Syrian government felt that there should be a strong Chinese intervention to reach a comprehensive solution to the crisis through the moves being made by the Beijing government, which will be followed by steps on more than one level. Through this initiative, Syria seeks to break its international isolation by strengthening its relations with the strong Chinese ally economically and militarily in order to keep pace with the Russian role in Syria ^[24].

China's core interests in Syria lie in its privileged geographical location, which can make Syria part of securing the transport route to Iraq and reaching the Mediterranean Sea, and it can establish its port on the Syrian coast to serve its project in expanding its trade as well as securing navigation routes ^[25].

It may be noted that the Chinese intervention in the crisis was characterized by caution throughout the early years of the crisis because the Chinese steps were carefully studied and understood the processes and ramifications of this crisis from all aspects except at the political or economic level. China seeks through its role to access energy sources and enter the markets of the Arab region by employing its capabilities and through the actors in this crisis to ensure its international interests ^[26].

The Arab region is one of the most important areas in the Chinese perception of Chinese soft policy and partnership strategy in the Chinese geoeconomic drawing, and with the increase in economic growth, that importance increases and takes renewed paths and motives in that strategy, and these paths and motives can be divided as follows:

The Chinese economy faces structural challenges resulting from economic development that cannot be overcome with internal financial and structural reform measures only, but it needs outlets in order to transfer its economic weight to nearby regions where demand is increasing due to the rapid increase in population growth in addition to the diversity of consumption patterns, and these countries need large investments to modernize infrastructure and their economies cannot afford these high costs, on the one hand, and on the other hand, China has accumulated a surplus in production and foreign currency balance due to weak domestic demand accompanied by an increase in economic growth due to policies that the state follows with a significant increase in the flow of foreign investment to China. One of the solutions is to engage in the global economy, as China has found the opportunity in the Arab region as it is an attractive area for investment and has a huge amount of energy sources and natural resources that China needs in the sustainability of its economy in addition to it is a large market for the disposal of its products and the strategic partnership with it serves the Chinese goal in the strategy ((pivoting in the West)) and these partnerships will open new horizons for the Belt and Road Initiative adopted by China in economic partnerships with the countries of the world.

Regional balance

Undoubtedly, the United States was and still is one of the most important determining factors of China's policy in the Middle East region in general and the Arab region in particular, as the impact of the absence of the Soviet Union from the region disrupted regional and international balances, especially between the great powers, and left a large strategic vacuum, so the United States hastened to fill the vacuum and rearrange the roles of the powers to the Middle East is fraught with conflicts And wars for fear that there will be a high political and economic cost, so China changed from carrying the banner of a global ideology like that adopted by the Soviet Union and its inability to ultimately perpetuate this conflict and competition, which led to its collapse and disintegration, but China was seeking to distance the United States from its areas of interests while the United States was active in meanwhile, the United States has begun to engineer a large Middle Eastern system that extends to Afghanistan, which is The western wing of China, which I believed was settled for its own benefit after the construction of the Shanghai organization, with Russia's orientation in preventing the approach of NATO to their borders, and to respond to the moves of the United States by approaching the Chinese borders, was met by China in getting closer to the Arab region, but it does not have a security character, but rather has an economic character that tempts the parties to engage in it and does not irritate the United States and feels that China is creeping towards its areas of influence, so it finds that the American factor is one of the most factors that limits the choices of the Chinese decision-maker and determines the options, directions and the extent to which China can go in order to achieve its goals [28].

Conclusion

Soft power has become the mirror that reflects the image of China's foreign policy and has recently achieved great success, especially in the Middle East region in general and the Arab region in particular, and this force has been able to use the Syrian crisis to its advantage, create interactions with international players, build strategic relations even with US allies and employ to reduce its dominance and influence without losing a single shot thanks to the soft power policy.

Based on the previous data, we can conclude the following:

1. Beijing has tried to take advantage of this crisis by promoting its geostrategic interests and at the same time maintaining consistency with its foreign policy of non-interference in the affairs of states.
2. Interference in regional conflicts may pose a threat to Chinese interests, as is the case in Syria, and it has also been a testing ground for the strategic partnership between China and Russia, and the use of soft power to weave strategic relations between the international powers involved in the Syrian crisis.
3. Beijing has tried to fill the void left by successive US administrations by taking a more central economic role, not only in the Levant, but also in the Middle East, and the conflict in Syria has provided it with the right conditions to do so
4. The fact is that the Syrian crisis has had a profound and direct impact on China's national security, as it gives it more opportunities and flexibility to test (great power diplomacy) outside the United Nations, through which it can assess its role and the impact it has had in managing this conflict.

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