



Geopolitics and non-western intervention in Syria

CHINA, THE SYRIAN CONFLICT, AND THE THREAT OF TERRORISM

China has a global agenda in Syria. Beijing rejects foreign military intervention to force regime change, but is not wedded to any particular outcome in the conflict.

China is hungry to demonstrate its growing role in global peace and security. Beijing's position on the Syrian conflict is largely guided by its wish to steer the global normative agenda away from foreign military intervention in domestic conflicts and towards prioritizing political settlements and upholding state sovereignty. As such, China is pushing back against what it sees as a western-led initiative to exploit humanitarian crises to fulfil geopolitical objectives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- If western governments want Beijing's support on Syria, they need to recognize their trust deficit on humanitarian intervention and focus on advancing a political solution that underpins long-term stability.
- China should enhance its humanitarian assistance in the region and has a potential large role in post-conflict Syria.
- China and western governments should intensify dialogue on counterterrorism policies in Syria and the Greater Middle East.

Military involvement to the same degree as the United States or Russia is still a non-starter for China.



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China holds up protracted instability in Libya following the 2011 NATO intervention, and the subsequent ousting of the Gaddafi government, as the main exhibit in its case against outside military action in Syria. On Libya, Beijing abstained from the UN Security Council resolution establishing a no-fly zone to protect civilians. Chinese officials subsequently argued that American and European militaries vastly overstepped their mandate; a position supported by a recent UK government inquiry into the Libyan intervention.

On Syria, China has been broadly supportive of Russian resolutions in the UN Security Council that protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian government, and since 2011, Beijing has vetoed four western-launched resolutions alongside Moscow. Before the Syrian conflict, Beijing had only employed its veto ten times since 1971, and China's increased use of the veto, demonstrates a more pronounced role in defending its positions.

China has been active in seeking a political settlement to the Syrian conflict. Beijing has backed peace plans moderated by the Arab League and the UN, participated in various talks over the past five years, and appointed a special envoy on Syria in 2016. China has also presented its own four-point plan in hopes of building momentum and unity among UN Security Council members to advance on a cease-fire and peaceful political transition.

But China's engagement on Syria has not yet translated into significant results. Beijing has offered few concrete and novel ideas in solving the conflict and provided relatively little support to stem the humanitarian crisis in the region. Unlike Afghanistan, where Beijing is worried about a growing security vacuum on

its western border, and devoting diplomatic attention and large amounts of financial aid, the Syrian conflict is not one that China is willing to commit serious energy and resources. Instead China may be waiting until after the fighting ends to provide financial aid and infrastructure cooperation during post-conflict reconstruction.

Balancing principles and interests

While its behaviour in the UN Security Council has favoured the Syrian government, China has tried to balance its interests in the conflict. China has hosted both the Syrian government and leading figures in the opposition in Beijing; steps to enhance and promote its engagement in the peace process, but also strategic moves to avoid being seen taking sides and hedging its bets on the conflict's outcome.

China's balancing act extends to relations with regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran, which are supporting opposing sides in the Syrian conflict. China would like to position itself as a potential broker of regional disputes around Syria. But trying to maintain a neutral position has its drawbacks. Both the Syrian government and opposition, and their regional backers, may ultimately view Beijing as not doing enough to support their objectives. In 2012, for example, Chinese flags were burnt in Arab capitals after Beijing vetoed a UN Security Council resolution calling for the removal of President Bashar al-Assad.

Among the foreign powers active in Syria, Beijing is regarded as the more passive partner to Russia in defending the Syrian government and President Assad from American and European intervention. Similar to Moscow, China stresses that Assad should be part of the peace process. Beijing viewed the softening of western calls in late 2015 for the Syrian

leader to step down as a diplomatic victory and opportunity for the major powers to get on the same page.

Yet China's position on Syria is not locked to that of Russia. Unlike Moscow, Beijing has few economic interests and political stakes invested with President Assad. Rather Chinese officials prioritise the maintenance of functioning government institutions. Beijing may regard Russia's military intervention as legitimate based on its approval from the Syrian government, but it remains uneasy about the Russia's heavy footprint. Chinese officials stress that military solutions cannot solve the conflict, but can only further destabilise the country and exacerbate the humanitarian crisis.

Fighting terrorism

Beijing fears that the Syrian conflict will serve to further inspire and globalize domestic terrorist groups. In recent years, longstanding tensions between the Chinese government and its Muslim, ethnic Uyghur population in north-western Xinjiang region have

fomented into multiple terrorist attacks in China and on Chinese nationals and interests abroad. In Syria, several thousand Chinese nationals, mainly Uyghur, are estimated to have joined Jabhat fath al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) while hundreds are fighting with the Islamic State. China is not part of the international military coalition against the terrorist groups in Syria, but Beijing is collaborating with Iraq, Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern governments on counterterrorism.

Beijing seeks to sever the links between terrorist groups in China with their international counterparts. It has pointed the finger at the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, a separatist and terrorist group, now called the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), for deadly knife attacks and suicide bombings across China in recent years. While western rights groups accuse Beijing of religious and cultural abuses against the Uyghur population, and conflating peaceful separatists with terrorists, the methods of the TIP are similar to Al Qaeda and other international terrorist groups.



China's military power grows with each passing year, but to date Beijing's willingness to intervene in conflicts far from home remains low.
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Uyghur militants have been linked to the 2015 Bangkok bombing as well as the August 2016 suicide attack on the Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan. While Beijing's focus is on its western border and threats emitting from Afghanistan and Central Asia, instability in Syria has opened another haven for terrorist groups seeking to harm China.

The military wildcard

China is the only member of the UN Security Council with no direct military activity in the Syrian conflict. After over a decade of watching the American military drain resources and become entangled in conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, Beijing prefers to maintain low-level engagement. But China still has an indirect military influence on the Syrian conflict. China was one of Syria's largest arms suppliers before the conflict and has leveraged the position of the Syrian army on the battlefield through its political support on the UN Security Council. Similar to other outside powers, Chinese weapons have come into the hands of opposing sides in the conflict via sales to Iran, Saudi Arabia and other states in the region. The Chinese navy participated in the UN mandated removal of chemical weapons from Syria in early 2014 but at the same time, China's largest arms manufacturer has been accused of selling chlorine gas to the Syrian government.

Military involvement to the same degree as the United States or Russia is still a non-starter for China. The People's Liberation Army and the special forces of the People's Armed Police still have limited capacity for long-range force projection, and little military and logistical experience overseas. But China's arm's length position on Syria to date may be evolving. The

high-level visit of a Chinese rear admiral to Damascus in August 2016 signalled deeper official engagement; Chinese military advisors are providing weapons training to the Syrian army.

While improbable, direct military involvement from China in Syria should not be taken completely out of the equation in the coming years. If China's security interests were threatened, a small-scale and short-lived military strike, sanctioned by the Syrian government, and likely in cooperation with Russia, could be made on China-linked terrorist groups operating in Syria. A new counterterrorism law permits Chinese security forces to be sent abroad. The expansion of China's global security apparatus, including a naval presence in the Gulf of Aden and plans to build a base in Djibouti, as well as advancements in its military transport and drone capabilities, make such a move more feasible.

But Beijing's response to a terrorist attack at home emanating from Syria will likely be a further tightening of security conditions in China and enhanced counterterrorism cooperation with partner governments in the Middle East. In Syria, Beijing will continue to play a low-key role in trying to push forward a political settlement to the conflict, claim diplomatic victories where it can, and focus on protecting its normative position in global affairs.

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Coverphoto: Liu Jieyi, Chinese Permanent Representative to the United Nations, votes to abstain a France-drafted UN Security Council resolution on Syria at the United Nations headquarters in New York, Oct. 8, 2016. ©Xinhua/Li Muzi

