



ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЕ ПРОЦЕССЫ В СОВРЕМЕННОМ МИРЕ

DOI: 10.22363/2313-1438-2019-21-1-56-65

CHINA'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE SYRIAN CRISIS AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF ITS NEUTRAL STANCE IN THE WAR

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Abstract. China today is a powerful state and an influential player in the global arena, as was demonstrated during the Syrian crisis, when China took a counterposition to the United States' stance in Syria and supported the Assad regime. Beijing put a veto on the international resolutions related to the Syrian crisis and abstained from voting, as it did in the past when dealing with the crises in the region. In a move that marked a new page in China's foreign policy, Beijing backed what was known as the six-point plan, calling for a ceasefire and settlement of the crisis through internal dialogue and proclaiming the inviolability of Syrian national sovereignty. In a subsequent move, China sent its envoy Li Huaqing (former Chinese ambassador to Syria) to Damascus to encourage the initiation of a dialogue between government forces and opposition. Following that, China sent Assistant Foreign Minister Zhang Ming (who had previously visited Egypt, Saudi Arabia and France) to the region to discuss ways of approaching the Syrian crisis. For the first time in its modern history, China renounced its policy of non-interference in crises outside its direct interests and immediate geopolitical space. The following paper will focus on China's stance in the Syrian crisis (supporting its peaceful settlement and keeping equal distance from all the parties in the conflict) and the future of Sino-Syrian relations based on the common history of the two countries.

Key words: China, Syria, Syrian Crisis, Chinese foreign policy, Middle East

INTRODUCTION

The Syrian Civil War, which started on Friday, March 15, 2011, is one of the most brutal multi-sided contemporary armed conflicts. It started with demonstrations against the Syrian regime and demands for more freedom and the end of corruption, but shortly escalated into a civil war involving multiple global actors. Numerous internationally supported terrorist groups, mostly composed of non-Syrian militants, began their attacks against the Assad regime, which led to the intervention of the Syrian government's allies, including Russia, China and Iran.

China, following the policy of non-intervention in other countries' internal affairs¹, supported the Syrian regime politically (using the veto power) and, whenever necessary,

¹ *Principles of China's Foreign Policy*. Asia for Educators; Columbia University; 2009.

rendered humanitarian and economic assistance. Unlike Russia, China abided by non-violent methods and had no direct military involvement in the Syrian war. From the beginning, Beijing has been a proponent of peace and a supporter of bloodless settlement of the Syrian crisis. Chinese government has welcomed several Syrian delegations in order to initiate a negotiation process between the Assad regime and their opposition, and to work on a strategy to stop the conflict.

Owing to its conciliatory position in the Syrian crisis, China has proven that power and diplomacy can be successfully combined to secure the nation's influence in the international arena. The evidence of Beijing's diplomatic strength is the fact that China is one of the few countries that have been conducting a dialogue with both the Assad regime and the opposition. Being an ally of the Syrian regime and saying "no" to military intervention, China ensured its diplomatic success and a prospect of developing friendly relations with Syria in the future.

The following work presents an overview of the Sino-Syrian diplomatic, economic, cultural and political relations throughout history and addresses the issue of China's role in the Syrian crisis, in particular, how through diplomatic efforts, Beijing managed to participate in conflict settlement without making enemies with any of the parties involved. China's diplomatic approach in dealing with conflicting international interests while maintaining their alliances indicates the wisdom of the incumbent Chinese leadership. The article focuses on future relations between the two countries following the Syrian crisis. As a result of his analysis, the author comes to the conclusion that China is highly unlikely to leave Syria without support, as taking Syrian side in the conflict strengthens its ties with the country that presents strategic value for the Chinese government.

Reports from Chinese officials show that China is not prepared to abandon its strategic ally (Syria) because it may harm its economic and political interests. Syria's geographical location at the crossroads of East and West has a special value for the Chinese "One Belt, One Road" initiative. China directly benefits from reestablishing diplomatic rapport with Syria, while Syrian officials welcome Chinese involvement.

I. HISTORY OF SINO-SYRIAN RELATIONS

China—Syria relations go back to ancient times; modern relations between Syria and China, however, were not officially established until 1956, when the two countries signed the Trade Payment Agreement [7. P. 89]. Syria was the second Arab country after Egypt to establish diplomatic rapport with China. It is noteworthy that Syria was one of the countries supporting a draft resolution to restore China's seat in the United Nations during the 26th General Assembly.

Syria was part of the ancient Chinese Silk Road, greatly contributing to strong Chinese presence in the Middle East. In October 1957, Chen Zhi Fang, the first Chinese ambassador to Damascus, arrived in Syria; a month later, the Syrian Embassy in Beijing began diplomatic missions. In June 1965, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited Damascus and held talks with the Syrian president. Later that year in September, Vice Premier and Foreign Minister of China Chen Yi visited Syria [9. P. 35—40].

The relationship between the Chinese Communist Party and the Syrian Ba'ath Party dates back to March 1986; since then the two parties have been able to maintain

a rapport. In May 1991, the Chinese-Syrian Friendship Association was established in Damascus. In May 1999, the Friendship Association was founded between the Syrian Parliament and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). In late October 2003, a Communist Party of China (CPC) delegation, headed by Wu Zhuanqing, member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, visited the Secretary of the Central Inspection and Inspection Committee in Syria; as a result of the meeting, the two parties reached an agreement for the years 2004—2006. The meeting was followed by two more visits: a CPPCC delegation, led by Vice President Lee Ming, and one under the chairmanship of Huang Chidong, member of the CPC Central Committee and Secretary of the Chongqing Municipal Party Committee. As the Arab-Israeli conflict unfolded, China sided with the Arabs, regarding Israel as a Western tool in the Middle East [12. P. 25—27]. China also offered to supply Syria with nuclear weapons to help it regain its occupied territories, and mobilized 10,000 troops to support the Palestinian people and the Arabs. China opposed the Iraqi attack on Kuwait and concurred with the Syrians on the need for a peaceful solution in accordance with the Arab joint decision.

Top-level Syrian officials holding numerous meetings with the CPC representatives included: Assistant Secretary-General of the Ba'ath Party, Abdullah Al-Ahmar (May 1998), Deputy President of Syria and Vice-President of the Progressive National Front, Muhammad Zuhair Masharaqah (December 1998), Deputy Prime Minister Mohammad Naji Otari (2000) (April 2001), Vice President Abdel Halim Khaddam (May 2001), President Bashar al-Assad (June 2004), and Deputy Secretary-General of the Ba'ath Party, Abdullah al-Ahmar (September 2004). On the Chinese side, the negotiators were: Vice Premier Wu Bangguo (May 1996), Vice Premier and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Qian Qichen (December 1997), Chairman of the National Committee of the National People's Congress, Li Peng (April 1999), Chairman of the Military Committee of the CPC Central Committee, State Councilor and Minister of National Defense, Chi Haotian (October 1999), Vice President Hu Jintao (January 2001), Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan (December 2001), and Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing (2005).

Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Damascus in 2001 and in June 2004. Later that year, Bashar al-Assad repaid a visit to China. In the course of the meeting, Hu Jintao outlined the development of China—Syria relations in three major directions. The first direction included promoting political exchanges between the two countries, involving high-level officials, parliament representatives and members of major parties. The presidents agreed to strengthen consultation and coordination between the two countries' government agencies on important international issues. The second direction of China—Syria bilateral relationship involved expanding the countries' economic and trade ties. The two sides consented to bolster trade in basic amenities, textiles and household electrical appliances, enhance cooperation in the fields of agriculture, science, technology, petroleum, and communications, as well as explore new areas of partnership. Finally, Jintao and Assad agreed to continue cooperation in the spheres of education, culture, tourism and health. In the course of the negotiations, the two sides spoke about maintaining high level exchanges in all fields and promoting friendship between the two peoples, which laid solid foundations for the evolution of the countries' bilateral relations.

The Syrian president welcomed Jintao's proposals as well as Chinese investments in economic reconstruction of Syria. The package of cooperation agreements signed by the two presidents boosted the Sino-Syrian relations to a new level.

Among agreements promoting trade exchange between the two countries were: the Trade and Payment Agreement (December 1955), the Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement (February 1963), the Trade Agreement (1972), the Long-Range Trade Agreement (1982) Promotion and Protection of Investment (1996), Agreement on Trade and Economic and Technological Cooperation (2001), Convention on the Prevention of Double Taxation (March 2003). A joint Chinese-Syrian economic and trade commission was established.

On March 18, 1965, the countries signed Cultural Cooperation Agreement. Within its framework, multiple executive programs were implemented, including cooperation in the fields of education, higher education, culture, art, cinema, music, publishing, fine arts and intellectual property rights. The agreement provided for construction of monuments, cultural centers, and libraries, as well as conducting seminars, training courses, scientific conferences, festivals, cultural weeks and holding cinematographic, theatrical and cultural exhibitions. In 1983, the Writers Union of China and the Syrian Writers Union signed an arrangement, as part of which numerous Arabic publications were translated into Chinese and published in China.

II. CHINA'S SUPPORT FOR THE ASSAD REGIME

A long-standing friend of the Syrian government since the rule of the late President Hafez al-Assad, China is the most important current ally of the Assad regime. Historically, Syria reciprocated the support by submitting the draft resolution to restore China's seat in the United Nations during the 26th General Assembly. During the Syrian crisis, China backed the Syrian regime using the right of veto and defending Syrian sovereignty in all international forums. Since March 2017, the Bashar al-Assad government has been on the rise, which was made possible by China's participation in the crisis resolution. While the US is losing its position in the Middle East, China's leverage in the region is growing, thanks in large part to its rapport with Assad and secured by Beijing's participation in the reconstruction of Syrian economy.

The Syrian Civil War has entered the global arena and opportunities arose for international players to consolidate their influence in the region. Standing by the Syrian regime was necessary for China in order to keep Syria in the eastern camp. China's diplomatic efforts were directed towards keeping Syria's territory undivided and preserving the sovereignty of the state, as well as preventing military aggression from the West. Another step towards securing China's position in the Middle East was appointment of a special envoy to Syria (March 29, 2016), a diplomat who had previously served as an ambassador to Iran. Since the beginning of the crisis, China has advocated its peaceful resolution and opposed military intervention. It supported political initiatives and meetings held under the international community's umbrella in Geneva, Vienna and Astana and provided humanitarian and financial assistance to the Syrian government during the war.

China has supported peaceful resolution of the Syrian crisis for several reasons. First of all, as a proponent of “no outside interference”, the Chinese government regarded the incumbent Syrian regime as a better alternative to chaos created by external intervention. At the same time, Beijing never came into conflict with the opposition, but instead supported national reconciliation and dialogue. The most important reason for China’s non-violent stance, however, is the fact that the Uighurs from Chinese province Xinjiang² have joined Syrian separatists groups³, which is totally unacceptable by China’s non-belligerence policy. Another reason is the need for stability in the Middle East in order for China to complete its “One Belt, One Road” initiative.

The reasons behind China teaming up with Russia in its support for the Assad regime and its opposition to the US foreign policy in the Middle East are obvious. However, unlike Russia, China has not gotten involved in the fighting as it doesn’t seek military domination, but instead focuses on economic interests and strives towards a win-win situation. As no ill will between Beijing, Assad and the opposition has been created, China might come out the biggest winner in the situation, establishing a firm foothold in the Middle East.

III. CHINA KEEPS EQUAL DISTANCE FROM ALL THE SIDES OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

China’s position regarding the Syrian crisis can be described as “neutral”, because it has always kept an equal distance from all the parties in the conflict in calling for a political resolution that satisfies all sides. In 2016, a delegation representing Syrian opposition visited China and met Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to discuss a way out of the crisis and a fair political solution. The Syrian opposition sees China as an intermediary between itself and the Assad regime, and deems it capable of advancing the reconciliation of the two sides. The fact that China did not support the Assad regime militarily, unlike Russia and Iran, makes them more agreeable for negotiation in the eyes of the Syrian resistance forces.

“I think the Syrian parties should be put on the right track and an effective mechanism should be put in place for a ceasefire and a transition to negotiations,” said Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Shunying. The Secretary-General of the National Coalition for the Forces of the Revolution and Opposition, Yahya Maktabi, alluding to the Geneva I conference, noted that China can contribute to finding a political solution, which stipulates the formation of a full-fledged transitional government authority, and stressed that the coalition distinguishes between the Russian and Chinese positions in the Syrian Civil War. The fact that Beijing has been visited by representatives of both the Syrian government and opposition confirms the importance of China’s neutral stance in resolving the Syrian crisis.

² China has serious security concerns on its northwestern border. Since 1990, radical separatists in Xinjiang have been organizing riots, assassinations, and bombings, claiming that the region is not a part of China and demanding autonomy. The East Turkestan Islamic Movement has sought to establish an Islamic Republic of East Turkestan. According to Chinese official sources, between 1990 and 2001, East Turkestan terrorist groups staged more than 200 attacks in Xinjiang, killing 162 people, including local community leaders and religious personnel.

³ Xinjiang Profile. *BBC News*. 13.08.2013.

China called on the Syrian parties to abide by the UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which proposes a road map for a peace process in Syria, setting out the outlines for UN-sponsored talks and a nationwide ceasefire. China's position is firm and demonstrates Beijing's serious intentions to restore peace in Syria. China has always advocated Syrian people's right to self-determination and showed respect for the sovereignty of the Syrian state.

Calling on the government and the opposition to hold on to their cease-fire commitments, China remains an ally to both. The Chinese envoy to Syria considers China's and Saudi Arabia's views on the crisis to be very much consistent and reiterates that China has assumed a flexible attitude to all parties and is open to suggestions on the peaceful settlement of the crisis. China and Saudi Arabia are actively cooperating on the issue of crisis resolution; meanwhile, China's oil imports from Saudi Arabia keep growing⁴.

We need to elaborate that China did not completely take Assad's or the opposition's side, but adopted a diplomatic approach of keeping an equal distance from both. The neutral status is what distinguishes the Chinese position and secures a promising future for China in the Middle East. What matters most for China is the safety of the Syrian people, therefore, the Chinese have been eagerly providing humanitarian and financial support.

IV. CHINA AS A POLITICAL INTERMEDIARY IN THE SYRIAN CRISIS

Lakhdar Brahimi, a newly appointed peace envoy to Syria, made a four-point proposal to resolve the Syrian crisis. Firstly, the involved parties will cooperate with Brahimi's efforts to overcome the conflict and work together to gradually stop the violence in the region. Secondly, the envoys, with the assistance of the relevant international organizations, will draw up a plan for the political transition in Syria in consultation with the Transitional Council comprised of various parties involved in the conflict. Thirdly, the international community will support Brahimi's efforts to make real progress in the implementation of the Geneva Conference statement [14], the six-point plan suggested by the former Special Envoy Kofi Annan and the Security Council resolutions relevant to the Syrian crisis. Fourthly, Brahimi called upon all parties involved in the Syrian crisis to commit to humanitarian assistance in order to alleviate human suffering in Syria.

Brahimi's four-point initiative was based on philosophical principles adopted by the Chinese government: those of non-violence and 'no outside interference' in national and religious matters. It also relied on the United Nations' canons and international organizations' experience in conflict resolution.

China's recent successful political activity in the Middle East is a result of experience gained by China in negotiations in Afghanistan, Yemen, Iran, and during the Arab-Israeli conflict. Today, because of its clever policy line, China has a strong foothold in the Middle East and acts as an intermediary between conflicting parties in the Syrian crisis.

⁴ China. U.S. Energy Information Administration. 22.04.2013.

Unlike the United States, Russia and France, who launched their military campaigns on the Syrian territory, China has no expansionist aspirations or agendas for their implementation, nor does it get involved in religious matters. It is guided solely by its economic interests while establishing trade ties and friendly relations with different countries around the globe. The Civil War in Syria is a stumbling block on China's way to implementing its economic ambitions, namely 'One Belt, One Road' initiative; so China is working relentlessly to end the Syrian crisis as soon as possible.

China's role as an intermediary and a peace protagonist will strengthen its global influence, earn it a reputation of a peace-loving nation and open new economic perspectives for the republic. While Western ambitions resolve themselves to establishing dominance in the region, Chinese policies are based on long-practiced principles of reciprocal exchange and dialogue.

The problems in the Middle East are an opportunity for China to prove the effectiveness of its diplomacy and boost its political and economic influence. Beijing was able to use the crisis in Syria to serve its interests in the Middle East and might come out as the biggest winner if the crisis is resolved peacefully.

V. CHINA'S FUTURE PARTNERSHIP WITH SYRIA

China's rise on the global stage is impressive: its influence is growing rapidly in both economic and political directions. Having adopted the policy of non-violence, it has the veto power to restrict military endeavors by other global players. When expanding economically, it strives towards mutual benefit; thus, for the Middle East — the main area of China's current interest — bilateral economic partnership may become a way out of the crisis.

With China's President Xi Jinping launching the "Silk Road" initiative, China has become an international economic and political center. This ambitious project covers many parts of the world and runs through Syria, making it a strategically important territory. Therefore, China's interest in peaceful resolution of the Syrian crisis is based, in large part, on its economic objectives. China will invest into economic reconstruction of Syria, and the Syrian government will welcome the investments and allow Chinese infrastructure projects on its territory.

China calls for Syria to be free of chemical weapons and allow a fair investigation if such weapons are found⁵. The inquiry committees should be international and provide strong evidence to support their findings. Having a major strategic interest in Syria, China was one of the first nations to encourage a dialogue between the warring parties. China is concerned with Syria's future and eagerly offers financial help.

China was backing up Syria throughout the crisis, providing financial and humanitarian support [8], as well as political assistance, manifested by the Chinese veto. Now the rapport between the two countries is robust and developing rapidly, and it is inevitable that China will be the main investor in the reconstruction of Syria after the crisis. Criticizing US military support for the Syrian opposition, the PRC urged Syria to restore

⁵ Dorsey J.M. China and the Middle East: Embarking on a Strategic Approach. *RSIS Commentary*. 16.09.2014.

the Golan Heights. Chinese support for the Assad regime increased when the Uighur separatists joined terrorist groups in the Syrian territory.

On February 5, 2015, the Syrian and Chinese parties signed an agreement on the provision of humanitarian assistance in the framework of the two countries' technical and economic cooperation. In early July, the two sides signed a deal securing Beijing's investments in a two-billion-dollar project, which entailed establishing 150 Chinese companies in Syria and providing 40,000 jobs for the Chinese in the Syrian labor market. In August 2017, a Chinese military delegation led by General Guan Youfei, head of the International Military Cooperation Bureau of the Central Military Commission of China, paid an official visit to Damascus, where they were received by Syrian Defense Minister Fahd Jassim Al-Fureij. "We have a strong relationship with China, and the Chinese army is working to further strengthen cooperation and communication in the military field with Syria", said Al-Fureij. It is worth mentioning that about 15 percent of the military equipment in the Syrian army has been supplied by China [10. P. 9]. Military support provided by the Chinese includes unmanned reconnaissance drones and training of Syrian sniper units, and Beijing plans to increase this support in the future.

As the Syrian government's priorities lie in the post-war economic reconstruction, China is ready to play an active role in Syria's future. The process of renovating hospitals has already been started, with China responsible for more than 20 projects. Having made significant investments in Syria's energy sector before the war — China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has holdings in all Syria's major oil companies, — China is also focused on restoring the oil and natural gas industry in the country [6]. Beijing condemned Western sanctions on Syrian oil production and exports when they were implemented in 2012 [4], and continued to purchase Syrian crude oil⁶. Since February 2017, China has regained control of the Syrian oil industry.

Syria's important geographic location, namely its sea ports in Tartous and Lattakia, make the country a strategically crucial to China's 'Belt and Road' initiative. Cultural diversity and multi-ethnicity of Syrian society are also in line with Chinese traditional principles of tolerance and liberalism. For the first time in its modern history, China has taken a firm political stance and stood by the Syrian regime, seizing the opportunity both to gain access to Syria's economy and also to cement an advantageous geopolitical relationship for the future.

Currently, Chinese companies are interested in the opportunities offered by the Syrian Investment Authority in coordination with the ministries and concerned parties. Bassam Haider, assistant Minister of Economy and Foreign Trade of Syria, welcomed Chinese businesses to the Syrian market and expressed hope that economic exchange between the two countries will increase in the near future. He also vouched that Chinese investments will be given priority in the reconstruction process. In retaliation, Chinese business executives pledged their participation in the reconstruction of Syrian economy and mentioned the necessity to work out a trade exchange agreement in order to further improve trade relations between the two countries. Upon entering the Syrian market, Chinese companies will provide their advanced reconstruction expertise, open credit lines

⁶ Donati J. Exclusive: Iran Helps Syria Ship Oil to China: Sources. *Reuters*. 20.03.2012.

of up to \$10 billion, including soft loans to major industries, and open Chinese banks in Syria to facilitate trade relations. “At the moment, we are actively discussing with the Syrian government and the Syrian embassy in China the plan to establish a Sino-Syrian industrial zone”, said Shen Yong, vice president of the China-Arab Exchange Association.

CONCLUSION

China is on its way to becoming one of the greatest powers in the international arena. Its importance as a global player was demonstrated during the Syrian crisis, when China stood up to the United States and supported the Syrian regime by imposing a veto on the US-led military intervention. China has also been calling for peaceful resolution of the crisis and a dialogue between the Syrian government and their opposition. It has held multiple meetings with both government and opposition leaders. Unlike Russia, China has had no direct military involvement in the Syrian Civil War and supported the Syrian regime through political, economic and humanitarian assistance, and continues to do so. China’s neutral stance in the Syrian crisis made it an intermediary in the conflict and secured its role in Syria’s future. The People’s Republic of China actively participates in the post-war reconstruction process on the Syrian territory, which opens the path for its “One Belt, One Road” initiative and fortifies its economic and political presence in the Middle East.

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DOI: 10.22363/2313-1438-2019-21-1-56-65

УЧАСТИЕ КНР В СИРИЙСКОМ КРИЗИСЕ И ПОСЛЕДСТВИЯ ЕЕ НЕЙТРАЛЬНОЙ ПОЗИЦИИ

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Современный Китай — мощное государство и влиятельный игрок на мировой арене, как это было продемонстрировано во время сирийского кризиса, когда Китай занял позицию, противоположную США и поддержал режим Б. Асада. Пекин наложил вето на международные резолюции, связанные с сирийским кризисом, и воздержался при голосовании, как не раз было в прошлом при урегулировании кризисов в регионе. В ходе движения, которое ознаменовало новую страницу во внешней политике Китая, Пекин поддержал так называемый план из шести пунктов, призывающий к прекращению огня и урегулированию кризиса посредством внутреннего диалога и провозглашающий нерушимость сирийского национального суверенитета. В качестве следующего шага Китай направил своего посланника Ли Хуацина (бывшего посла Китая в Сирии) в Дамаск, чтобы стимулировать начало диалога между правительственными силами и оппозицией. После этого Китай направил в регион помощника министра иностранных дел Чжан Мина (который ранее посетил Египет, Саудовскую Аравию и Францию) для обсуждения путей решения сирийского кризиса. Впервые в своей новейшей истории Китай отказался от политики невмешательства в кризисы вне своих прямых интересов и непосредственного геополитического пространства. Настоящая статья посвящена анализу позиции Китая в сирийском кризисе (поддержка его мирного урегулирования и сохранение равной дистанции от всех сторон конфликта) и будущему китайско-сирийских отношений на основе общей истории двух стран.

Ключевые слова: Китай, Сирия, сирийский кризис, китайская внешняя политика, Ближний Восток

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Статья поступила в редакцию 17.11.2018.
Received 17.11.2018.

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