

Syria Crisis and a New Political Agenda for China: Changes or Continuity?

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Abstract

After beginning crisis in Syria and subsequently escalating it, different actors including China entered war field in the country. Accordingly, since early 2016, China has increased its mediation efforts to help Syria achieve peace and stability. This study evaluates Chinese mediation efforts in the Syrian conflict by examining its motivations for becoming more involved in the peace process, as well as the implications of China's longstanding non-interference policy in the Middle East. The Syrian peace process has offered a unique opportunity, and a stage, to predict what kind of role China might play in present and future wars and conflicts in the region. Although Chinese policy has not yet changed fundamentally, Beijing is under increasing pressure to take a more pragmatic and flexible approach in its non-interference policy.

Key words: Syria; China; Middle East Order; Energy

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Introduction

On August 18, 2016, senior Chinese military officials announced their intention to provide personnel training and humanitarian aid to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government. This announcement occurred just days after Chinese Rear Admiral Guan Youfei's trip to Damascus. Guan's diplomatic outreach to Assad's government included bilateral negotiations with Syrian Defense Minister Fahd Jassem al-Freij and a consultation with Lt. Gen. Sergei Chvarkov, the head officer at Russia's naval base in Latakia.

Even though China has maintained an economic and security partnership with Damascus for decades, China's expanded involvement in Syria can only be partially explained by its historic commitments to Assad. Chinese policymakers view the Syrian crisis as a golden opportunity to advance a normative agenda that bolsters China's influence in the developing world. The Chinese government's active involvement in resolving the Syrian conflict has also allowed Beijing to assert itself as a major diplomatic arbiter in the Middle East.

Thus, United States and Russia are not the only players in the Syrian crisis. In fact, a prominent role is played by China, also interested in the resolution of the conflict that have been tearing, for more than three years, the Middle Eastern country. Beijing, along with Moscow, has used three times the veto power in the UN Security Council to block the U.S. proposals aimed to punish the Bashar al-Assad. At the same time, China has shown itself as strong supporter of dialogue between government forces and opposition as a unique and desirable solution to the conflict.

Chinese position towards Syrian crisis can be summarized in five points expressed by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the opening of Geneva 2, the negotiating table started on January 22 with the aim of overcoming the conflict between the parties: political resolution; no outside interference; inclusiveness in transition process and national reconciliation, unity, and commitment to humanitarian assistance. Superficially, Chinese action in Syria could be interpreted as a simple act of interference against the United States, supporters of the international intervention to remove the Syrian leader, but hides much deeper motivations that respond to the chronic insecurity that drives Chinese foreign policy.

Years of armed conflict and unrest have turned the security situation in Syria into a refugee crisis and humanitarian nightmare. The Syrian

civil war has entered its sixth year, becoming one of the worst crises of the twenty-first century in the Middle East. From the start of the Syrian conflict, China has kept its distance and focused mainly on protecting its expanding commercial and investment interests in the region. Nevertheless, escalating violence from Syria in 2016 has pressured Beijing to move off the sidelines and take a more active role in the international efforts to bring peace and stability to the country.

While there are many different global actors involved in the Syrian peace process, each pursuing its own interests, there is comparatively little understanding of China's motivations to resolve the ongoing conflict in Syria. Therefore, this study seeks to examine China's mediator role in the Syrian civil war in order to understand: What are the Chinese motivations for becoming more involved in the peace process in Syria? Does China's role in the Syrian peace process reflect a fundamental change in its non-interference policy in the Middle East? And, if that is the case, is Syria only the beginning of China's new assertiveness to position itself as a major actor within the Middle East?

1- China's position on Syrian crisis

Continued conflict in Syria has brought sufferings to the Syrian people and impacted peace and stability in the Middle East. China is deeply worried about the situation. China maintains that political settlement is the only realistic way out of the Syrian crisis. All relevant parties in Syria should take credible steps to implement the spirit of the communiqué of the foreign ministers' meeting of the Action Group on Syria, cease fire and stop violence immediately, positively respond to the initiative of holding the second Geneva conference on the Syrian issue, and start and implement a Syrian-led, inclusive political transition as soon as possible. Relevant parties in the international community should provide positive and constructive help for the political settlement of the Syrian issue and avoid taking any action that could further militarize the crisis.

China follows the latest developments in Syria closely. We firmly oppose the use of chemical weapons by anyone. China supports the UN investigation team in conducting independent, objective, impartial and professional investigations. The next step should be determined by the Security Council based on the findings of the UN investigation team. Unilateral military actions that bypass the Security Council will have serious impact on the situation in Syria and the Middle East region and

they are also a violation of international law and the basic norms governing international relations (<http://bw.china-embassy.org>)

China has maintained an objective and just position and a responsible attitude on the Syrian issue. We are committed to protecting the fundamental interests of the Syrian people, maintaining peace and stability in the Middle East region and upholding the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and basic norms governing international relations. China has made consistent efforts to promote peace and encourage dialogue, firmly supported and actively promoted the political settlement of the Syrian issue, and supported Mr. Brahimi, UN-Arab League Joint Special Representative for Syria, in making impartial mediation. China will respect and support any settlement plan on the Syrian issue as long as it is widely accepted by all relevant parties in Syria. China has watched closely the humanitarian situation in Syria. They have provided humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people, including Syrian refugees in other countries, as our ability permits, and will continue to do so (<http://bw.china-embassy.org>).

China's handling of the Syrian civil war differs markedly from the West's approach. Since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011, China has consistently upheld the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign countries. China's strict interpretation of national sovereignty has caused it to view Assad's government as Syria's sole legitimate governing authority. China has refuted U.S. President Barack Obama's argument that Assad's war crimes have caused him to lose his moral authority to govern Syria. The Chinese government's strident opposition to a Western-led regime change mission in Syria builds on its criticisms of the 1999 NATO bombings in Kosovo and, more recently, the 2011 overthrow of Libyan dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi. As many developing countries view Western Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norms for military interventions as a disguised form of imperialism, China's position in Syria has helped it expand its range of international allies. International support for China's position on Syria is very valuable for Beijing's broader geopolitical ambitions, particularly its quest to delegitimize The Hague's ruling against its expansionary conduct in the South China Sea. China's expanded attention to Syria is a powerful display of Beijing's disagreement with the norms set by Western-dominated international institutions. By articulating an unerringly consistent message on state sovereignty, China could strengthen its

alliances with developing countries that support its South China Sea claims (Ramani, 2016).

Even though China shares Russia's commitment to Assad's survival, Chinese policymakers have implicitly questioned Russia's commitment to a multilateral political solution to the Syrian conflict. As Shannon Tiezzi noted in October 2015, the Chinese government is uneasy with Russia's unilateral airstrikes and missile launches on Assad's behalf. The Chinese Foreign Ministry's September 2015 statement that "military action is not part of the solution in Syria" is still largely representative of China's position a year after Russia's pro-Assad intervention began in earnest. To demonstrate Beijing's disenchantment with Putin's Syria policy, China has intervened unilaterally on Assad's behalf in ways that have occasionally clashed with Russia's interests. Even though Putin has consistently supported the disarmament of Assad's chemical weapons arsenal, there is evidence that China's largest arms manufacturer, Norinco, covertly sold chlorine gas to the Syrian government in the early stages of the conflict (Ramani, 2016)

Beijing's alleged chemical weapons sales to Assad demonstrate that China is willing to diverge from Russia's foreign policy preferences to achieve its own interests in Syria. It also reveals China's desire to bolster its international status among anti-Western authoritarian regimes and potentially challenge Russia's role as the leading normative counterweight to American hegemony in the Middle East.

2- China's interests in Syrian war field and peace process

The Syrian issue has offered China an opportunity, and a stage, to ponder what kind of a role it should play in the world. On issues such as Syria, China usually adopts the stance of "non-interference in other countries' internal affairs." Such a stance, however, cannot exempt China from the affair. Its persistence in, and attempt to protect the "non-interference" principle has involved contradictions, conflict and even confrontation with certain Western countries, especially the United States and some European Union member states, who believe in interventionism. It is this difference in principle that has placed China in contradiction with the West on the Syrian issue. Beijing's role as mediator in the Syrian conflict must be examined in the context of its key interests as well as that of the potential challenges to the realization of those interests. A careful analysis reveals that Beijing's efforts to play a

mediator role in the Syrian conflict is strongly influenced by a mix of two key factors: geo-strategic and geo-economic.

Geo-Strategic interests

Unlike Russia or the US and Europe, China's presence in Syria is of no strategic bearing. It has no military facilities in that country. All it has is a limited volume of trade and other commercial businesses. The Sino-West discord on Syria stems from China's "non-interference" principle. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China joined Russia to veto six Western resolutions on the Syrian issue during the period from 2011 to 2013 (Zhonying, 2013).

China is acting out of a combination of geo-strategic interests, the key factor being security and the connection between the Syrian crisis and China's own national security (Lin, 2014). Beijing is very concerned about the growing number of militants of Chinese Uyghurs who have joined the Islamic State and trained with extremists in Syria, returning home to feed local jihadist movements. The links forged between ISIS and Uyghur extremists have already affected China's internal security and led to the proliferation of terrorists in Xinjiang Province and Central Asia (Drennam, 2015). As Zhang Chunxian, Communist Party secretary of Xinjiang, has said, "ISIS has a huge international influence and Xinjiang can't keep aloof from it and we have already been affected" (Jia, 2015). Li Shaoxian, vice-president of a think-tank with ties to the Chinese Ministry of State Security, warned that "many hundreds or thousands" of Uyghurs from the country's western Xinjiang province were involved with ISIS in Syria (Batchelor, 2016).

China's expanded support for Assad's government is also a powerful indicator of Beijing's growing power projection capacity in the Middle East. By expanding Beijing's influence in the Middle East/North Africa region, Chinese policymakers can demonstrate to their own people and to the international community that China is on the verge of becoming a superpower with global geopolitical reach (Ramani, 2016).

Thus, the Syrian conflict is also arguably the most important geo-strategic issue in the Middle East, drawing all of the key regional players as well as the great powers, who all see themselves as having a vital stake in the success of the peace process. If China does nothing, it might lose credibility as a rising player on the world stage, and thus cannot afford to be absent from the peace talks. Active engagement in the Syrian peace talks will increase China's influence in the Middle East and strengthen its

dealings with other great powers on other global or regional issues (Gan, 2016).

Further, Chinese mediation in the Syrian conflict is aimed to improve its image as a responsible stakeholder. Defending a positive international and regional image is central to Beijing's aspirations as well as its political and economic interests (Rakhmat, 2015), since countries in the Middle East, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, have expressed the desire that China exert more influence and involvement in the region's affairs in order to counterbalance great powers like the US and Russia (Kaijun, 2016).

More importantly, the Syrian peace process provides a unique opportunity for Beijing's diplomats to broaden their experience with multilateral global crisis management and conflict mediation. Beijing's success in mediating and fostering dialogue to shape the resolution of international or regional conflicts is central to Chinese foreign policy, reflecting its status as a responsible global power (Rudolf, 2016).

The other geo-strategic interest for China is balancing strategy in the Middle East through Syrian war field. China's non-interventionist stance in Syria has helped Beijing expand its soft power and range of allies in the Middle East. By fiercely opposing a military solution to the Syrian conflict, China has strengthened its relationships with both Iran and Saudi Arabia — no mean feat, as the two states have opposite positions on the civil war. China's staunch support for non-interference in Syria's internal affairs has further entrenched the perception among Iranian policymakers that Beijing is a stable economic and security partner. In the years leading up to the July 2015 Iran nuclear deal, Chinese policymakers signed large-scale arms contracts with Tehran to capitalize on positive Iranian public perceptions of China. According to *The Diplomat's* David Volodzko, Iran imported 31.7 percent of its weapons from China in 2014. Iran has diverted many of these Chinese-made weapons to Syria to assist Assad's crackdowns on Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra, and moderate rebel groups. Iran has courted Chinese diplomatic assistance in Syria to rally international support for its pro-Assad military campaign and boost its prospects of membership in the Beijing-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). China has responded to Iran's diplomatic overtures by providing support for Assad in the UN and endorsing Iran's SCO membership goals (Ramani, 2013).

To strengthen the Beijing-Tehran relationship, the Chinese military has held joint military drills with Russia on Syria's Mediterranean coast and maintained a strong alliance with Iran's Lebanese ally Hezbollah. Therefore, while China has refused to militarily intervene in Syria alongside Iranian forces, its indirect pro-Assad actions have helped entrench Tehran as a vital Chinese ally in the Middle East. At the same time, China's unflinching opposition to military intervention in Syria has ensured that its pro-Assad actions do not jeopardize its status as Saudi Arabia's leading trade partner. Since the start of the conflict, the Chinese government has diplomatically engaged Saudi Arabia on the Syrian crisis. China's new chief envoy tasked with devising a workable peace settlement for Syria has pledged to visit Riyadh and devise a solution to the Syrian crisis that Saudi Arabia would find acceptable. To demonstrate the credibility of its non-interference policy to Saudi policymakers, China has sold hundreds of millions of dollars in arms to Saudi Arabia. Many of these arms have been used to fund Syrian rebel groups. While the Saudi Arabia-China partnership remains largely economic in nature, Beijing's accommodation of Saudi interests in Syria has allowed it to maintain a fruitful, small-scale security partnership with Riyadh (Ramani, 2013).

Even though Beijing has maintained a strong relationship with Assad, China's reluctance to intervene in Syria has set it apart from the rest of the UN Security Council. China's ability to maintain close relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia has bolstered its influence in the Middle East. The willingness of Western policymakers to acknowledge China's growing importance as a power broker in Syria and diplomatically engage Chinese officials could profoundly shape the outcome of future multilateral peace negotiations in Syria.

Geo-Economic Interests

China's motivations to participate in Syrian peace talks are also driven by geo-economic interests. China wants to ensure that its economic interests in the region are protected and promoted. For years, China has worked to expand its diplomatic involvement in the Middle East in lockstep with the expansion of its economic interests. According to Chinese government data from 2014, Sino-Middle Eastern economic exchange has soared to a value of \$340 billion, the number of Chinese workers in the region has also risen dramatically, and 52 percent of China's oil imports now come from the Middle East (Gan, April 3, 2016). Thus, Beijing was forced to moderate its non-interference stance

and to take a more proactive stance toward the region's affairs (Zhongying, 2013).

Although China does not have significant political or economic ties with Bashar al-Assad's government (Weitz, 2013). Beijing fears that the Syrian conflict could spill over and destabilize the greater Middle East. The ethno-religious conflict in Syria, largely based along the Sunni-Shiite schism, has already spilled over into neighboring countries like Lebanon and Iraq (Beaumont, 2013). Further escalation could increase instability and disrupt trade within the wider region, a potential disaster for the Chinese economy, given that over half of its oil imports come from the Middle East (Tiezzi, 2014).

Moreover, China wants to play the role of mediator and act as a force of persuasion in conflict resolution to ensure the success of the "One Belt One Road" (OBOR) initiative. A stable and peaceful Middle East is a crucial element if the implementation of the OBOR initiative is to succeed. Since the Middle East has a strategic position in the OBOR planned routes, it is vital to Beijing to play a more active role in security issues in the region (Chang, 2015). For example, Turkey, one of the few key and indispensable partners for implementation of the OBOR project (Chaziza, 2016), has suffered huge economic repercussions from its proximity to the Syrian conflict (Akmehmet, 2015).

More importantly, China is hoping to obtain maximum economic benefit from the post-war reconstruction process. China's Special Envoy for Syria, XieXiaoyan, has said that China is ready to work with other major powers, including Russia, in post-war reconstruction efforts in Syria (Sana, 2016). After ISIS and Islamist militants are eliminated, either by Russia or a Western coalition, and following its pattern in Afghanistan and Iraq, Beijing will very likely come to Syria as a major investor and try to take over the oil and other resources there (Chaziza, 2014: 14-31).

3- Chinese non-intervention policy on Syria

Non-interference is a fundamental and generally uncompromising principle of China's foreign policy, though it evolves in accordance with the changes and challenges in the international and regional environment (Chaziza, 2016). Beijing's longstanding insistence on non-interference in other countries' domestic policies and issues, rejection of foreign military intervention, and primary focus on the development of mutually beneficial economic and commercial relations, increasingly falls short of

what is necessary to safeguard its vital geo-strategic and geo-economic interests (Dorsey, 2016).

Since the 1950s, the concepts of sovereignty and of non-interference have been seen as a cornerstone of China's foreign policy. Specifically, China does not involve itself in the internal affairs of other countries, unless it is in its own national or economic interests (Chaziza, 2014). Chinese leadership considers the Middle East the "graveyard of great powers," and generally seeks to avoid becoming involved in the region's internal affairs or being perceived as aligning with particular countries or stakeholders (Alterman, 2008). Notwithstanding this, recent political upheavals such as the Arab Spring, power changeovers in Egypt, and incidents in Africa, have given Beijing the opportunity to enlarge its presence in the region, which it does using its diplomatic, military, and economic capabilities wisely and creatively (Hanauer, 2014).

However, despite its official non-interference stance, it is impossible for Beijing to stay away from intervention in Middle East affairs. China's rapid economic expansion and success have given the Middle East a more central importance, since the region's oil and natural gas are essential for maintaining China's economic development (Market, 2012). According to the Xinhua News Agency, over the decade between 2005 and 2015, China's economic ties with the Middle East increased from \$20 billion to \$230 billion, and the figure is expected to top \$500 billion by 2020 (Xinhua, 2016). Moreover, China's oil imports have increased dramatically, and the region remains the largest source of its crude oil. In 2014, the Middle East supplied 3.2 million barrels per day (bbl/d) or 52 percent, although Beijing is attempting to diversify its supply sources in various regions (<https://www.eia.gov/>). More important, peace and stability in the Mideast is also essential if China's "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) initiative which aims to bridge China, Europe, and Africa through infrastructure, transportation, and communications.

While Beijing tends to leave Middle Eastern diplomacy to the other permanent members of the UN Security Council, that is, to the U.S, Russia, or the European powers, it is now trying to become more involved and to play a diplomatic role in regional affairs. Over the years, China did play such a role, for instance, in the resolution of the Darfur issue in Sudan, helping to promote progress in the Iranian nuclear negotiations, as well as emerging as a broker in the Afghan conflict

(Xinhua, 2015). Yet whether these Chinese diplomatic initiatives achieved practical results remains questionable.

Since exercising its veto power in the UN Security Council (UNSC) during deliberations on the Syrian crisis in 2011 and 2012 (by way of contrast, China actively supported the passage of Resolutions 2043 and 2059, which authorized and then renewed the mandate for the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria), China has begun to adjust its attitude and activity (Chaziza, 2014), that is, to actively engage with the Syrian crisis to promote a political resolution.

China's mediator role in the Syria peace process has manifested in a range of diplomatic endeavors. First, Beijing hosted representatives of both the Syrian government and opposition forces, as part of its efforts to promote peace talks and the political settlement (Qingyun, 2016). Second, in March 2016 China appointed its own Special Envoy, Xie Xiaoyan, to help mediate in the conflict in Syria. Even though this appointment was above all else symbolic, it demonstrated China's determination to increase its diplomatic involvement in the Syrian crisis (<http://www.scmp.com>). Third, Beijing supported the mediation efforts of the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for Syria (<http://losangeles.china-consulate.org>) and provided multiple rounds of humanitarian assistance to relieve the suffering of the Syrian people (Wu, 2015). Furthermore, as a permanent member of the UNSC, China supported the passing of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254, which laid the framework for a possible end to the Syrian crisis (<http://www.un.org>). Finally, China has taken part in all international meetings on the Syrian issue in Vienna in October 2015 (Rudolf, 2016) and the convening of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) in November 2015, as well as participated in both Geneva Conference I and II in 2012 and 2014 respectively (Xinhua, 2016).

Between 2014 and 2016, Beijing became more proactive in a number of Middle Eastern issues, despite its traditional non-interference stance. Its willingness to play the role of a neutral mediator and act as a force of persuasion in conflict resolution is driven by the need to ensure energy security and also by the fact that its key interests in the region have expanded significantly beyond this narrow focus of energy security (<http://www.eia.gov>). Thus, China's more proactive mediation role in Syria conflict is perhaps not so surprising.

With no external interference, in addition of defending a cornerstone of its foreign policy, China is opposed to any suggestion of tightening the already tense situation in the Middle East. A worsening of the crisis in Syria, threatening the start of a regional conflict, would lead to unimaginable dangers for Beijing in terms of energy supplies that make the Middle East so vital to the livelihood of the Chinese economy. Regional instability could cause serious problems for trade and oil imports. The surging Chinese economic growth cannot afford any stops (<http://mediterraneanaffairs.com>).

Beijing's updated diplomatic approach raises the question of whether China's mediator role in the Syrian peace process reflects a critical transformation in its non-interference policy in Middle East affairs. For instance, China's decision to host both Syrian government and opposition delegations for peace talks marks a change from its traditional approach:[39] in the past, China had showed little diplomatic ambition in these areas, unlike other major powers, such as the U.S. and Russia. Given that Beijing has a unique position in these peace negotiations because it enjoys a trusted relationship with both the Syrian government and its opposition, the Syrian National Coalition (SNC)—whose president Khaled Khoja met with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in early 2016—China's mediator role offers a new setting and new hope for successful peace negotiations (Zhongying, 2013).

However, China has apparently not yet reached the point where it is willing or able to deepen its involvement, to the extent that it is not prepared to send its military to fight in Syria or to join the Russian campaign against ISIS. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has said that China will not take part in any coalition fighting "terrorist groups" in the Middle East. China's Middle East foreign policy has never been articulated in terms of forging broader strategic partnerships or intentions other than its general drive to secure resources, investments and to expand its influence through economic ties and its OBOR initiative (Dorsey, 2016).

In January 2016, on the eve of President Xi's visit to the Middle East, the Chinese government issued its first Arab Policy Paper, which stopped short of clearly spelling out Chinese strategic interests or intentions in the region. It states Beijing's overall vision for regional relations, but without getting into the complexities of how that vision will be realized, and does not really add much to what is already known about China's Middle East

foreign policy. The paper reiterates the longstanding principle of non-interference, and emphasizes that Beijing's interactions with the Middle East are largely limited to the economic sphere (Tiezzi, 2016).

Moreover, as part of its traditionally cautious approach to diplomacy, China has also been careful not to interfere directly in Syria's internal affairs, either politically or militarily. Beijing realizes that if its mediating efforts fall, its credibility and positive image in the region may be damaged. Thus, China has repeatedly urged a political solution as the only way to resolve the conflict in Syria. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said after the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2254 that there is "no military solution" to the crisis and that "political negotiation" is the only viable option. The future of Syria must be independently decided by its people and the political process must be Syrian-led and Syrian-owned. More likely, it seems that Beijing's new diplomatic approach to the Syrian conflict should be perceived through the prism of "Chinese characteristics." Beijing's willingness to play the role of mediator and act as a force of persuasion in conflict resolution perfectly suits its non-interference policy framework, which is limited to participating in multilateral peace mediation and projecting a positive image of a reliable regional power or key stakeholder. Beyond that, the Chinese government has insisted that the U.N. should be the main channel for mediation in the Syria peace process.

Additionally, to avoid too sharp a break with its non-interference stance, Chinese officials have stressed that peace dialogues and negotiations must be Syrian-led and Syrian-owned, consistent with the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law, and based on support by the great powers. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in the December 2015 meeting of the ISSG, offered proposals for a successful political transition in Syria which include three elements: political settlement, anti-terrorism, and post-war construction. Saying "no" to the military intervention not only protects the economic interests, albeit basic, but responds to a specific political logic. The goal is to block western claims of direct intervention in the domestic affairs of individual countries so as safeguarding China itself from the threat of meddling in its internal and turbulent affairs (Xinhua, 2015)

Syrian crisis is also interesting because of the Sunnis and Shiites discord, whose aggressiveness Beijing is interested observer. Among its reasons of internal instability, China central government has the Uighurs,

Turkic minority Sunni northwestern region of Xinjiang, claiming autonomy from Beijing, which became protagonist of several terrorist attacks. The linkage between this group and the Syrian conflict is described by the participation of several jihadist Chinese formations in the violence taking place in the Middle Eastern country. Avoiding a disastrous fall of the Shiite Assad means for Beijing the defense of someone whose fall would legitimize this exceedingly dangerous minority that threaten the internal stability and the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party.

The five points of Wang Yi show several weaknesses due to the lack of clarity on the measures necessary to put these ideas into effect. The third and fourth points are those more difficult to achieve in light of the political scenario in Syria. Geneva 2, however, achieves the goal professed by Beijing several times since the outbreak of the Civil War: an opportunity for a political solution to the Syrian conflict to ensure the regional and international stability. The necessity of the second, in the light of western opposition about Chinese use of veto, led the Communist Party of China to show its full support to the hypothesis collaborative, not hesitating to send their boats to assist with the decommissioning of chemical weapons Syrian. In this way, Beijing is trying to not tarnish its international image and its soft power play despite the many criticisms that Beijing's actions in the world, and not only in Syria, continue to generate. Defending a positive international image is important for China's political and economic interests ([http:// mediterraneanaffairs . com](http://mediterraneanaffairs.com)).

To sum up, China has shown willingness to act as a mediator in the Syrian peace process mainly because it has come to realize that the fragile situation in Syria is not favorable to its geo-economic and geo-strategic interests. However, Beijing has never before played the role of lead mediator in the Middle East, perhaps because the region has always been within the U.S. sphere of influence. Thus, China's mediation efforts in Syria are limited, due to both economic and strategic constraints as well as adherence to its own longstanding non-interference principle. China still shows a lack of desire to be more directly and deeply involved in the Syrian conflict and thus prefers multilateral peace mediation through the U.N. or other multilateral organizations.

Conclusion

China to just stay away from Syria's "internal affairs". There is no absolute "non-interference" anywhere in the world. In fact, while keeping contact with the Assad government, China has appealed to all political parties in Syria for a political solution. It also made attempts to contact the anti-Assad parties and even invited them to visit China. China joined in the international effort for the settlement of the Syrian issue, for instance the Vienna conference. All these moves suggest a kind of involvement in the "internal affairs" of Syria. On the one hand, China will never abandon the "non-interference" principle, as it needs it to handle its relations with non-Western countries in Asia, Africa and Latin-America; as well as to resist the West's interference in its own internal affairs. On the other hand, however, following this principle is in contradiction to the West's interventionist diplomacy and thus will project a negative image of China in the West-dominated international community of hindering the West's intervening efforts. Like most other members of the international community, China also concerns itself with the aftermath of the Syrian civil war, such as the humanitarian crisis and, particularly, the refugee problem. After having vetoed six resolutions on Syria in the UN Security Council together with Russia, China began to adjust its attitude and stance.

Thus, the Syrian peace process has provided a unique opportunity for Chinese foreign policy to broaden its experience with multilateral global crisis management and conflict mediation. Beijing could eventually emerge as a mediator in the Syrian conflict. Having the ability to shape the resolution of international or regional conflicts is essential to China's desire to take on more international responsibilities and to showcase its status as a global power. Moreover, China's lack of historic and political baggage in the Middle East puts it in a strong position to be a key mediator in bringing lasting peace to Syria. In many ways Beijing is also far better positioned than the U.S. or Russia to play the "honest broker" in the Middle East, precisely because of its lack of past involvement in the Syrian conflict.

However, in the meantime, China still shows a lack of desire to become deeply involved in the conflicts of the region, and for the time being its involvement in the Middle East is mainly economic. Strategically, Beijing is satisfied with its role in encouraging peace negotiations through multilateral peace mediation, and so China's mediation efforts in Syria conflict are mostly aimed at conflict

management rather than conflict resolution. On Chinese officials, an issue such as the Syrian crisis is far beyond a single country's "domestic affairs" but rather an issue of global concern. Major powers' coordination and cooperation and their success or failure determines whether the world will be an orderly one. If the Syrian issue is dominated by the US and Russia only, it is unfair, and unreasonable, to Syria, the Middle East and the whole world. So, China's role is then particularly important, and irreplaceable. China's role is to prevent the Syrian issue from becoming a deal between the US and Russia only, and to push for more international cooperation. Only in this way can the Syrian issue be "settled politically. As China's geo-strategic and geo-economic interests in the Middle East increase, coupled with expectations by regional and international forces that Beijing will play a larger political and diplomatic role in the region's multiple conflicts, its policy of non-interference will face more and more challenges. These changes and challenges may require China, in the near future, to take a more pragmatic and flexible approach regarding its non-interference policy. Thus, the Chinese involvement in the peace process in Syria is significant since it predicts the future of this policy and the direction these changes may take.

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