



**SYRIA'S CIVIL WAR:
STAGE FOR GREATER CHINESE INVOLVEMENT
IN THE MIDDLE EAST?**

By Mordechai Chaziza*

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.

INTRODUCTION

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.¹ 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.

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.² 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.³ 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.⁴

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.⁵ 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 2020.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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 activity⁹, 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ Third, Beijing supported the mediation efforts of the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for Syria¹² and provided multiple rounds of humanitarian assistance to relieve the suffering of the Syrian people.¹³ 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.¹⁴ Finally, China has taken part in all

international meetings on the Syrian issue in Vienna in October 2015¹⁵ and the convening of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) in November 2015¹⁶, as well as participated in both Geneva Conference I and II in 2012 and 2014 respectively.¹⁷

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?

CHINESE INTERESTS IN SYRIAN PEACE PROCESS

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 Factors

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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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."²⁰ 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.²¹

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.²²

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,²³ 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.²⁴

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.²⁵

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.²⁶ Thus, Beijing was forced to moderate its non-interference stance and to take a more proactive stance toward the region's affairs.

Although China does not have significant political or economic ties with Bashar al-Assad's government,²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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.²⁹

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.³⁰ For example, Turkey, one of the few key and indispensable partners for implementation of the OBOR project,³¹ has suffered huge economic repercussions from its proximity to the Syrian conflict.³²

More importantly, China is hoping to obtain maximum economic benefit from the post-war reconstruction process. China's Special Envoy for Syria, Xie Xiaoyan, has said that China is ready to work with other major powers, including Russia, in post-war reconstruction efforts in Syria.³³ 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.³⁴

SYRIAN PEACE PROCESS AND CHINESE NON-INTERFERENCE POLICY

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.³⁵ 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.³⁶

Between 2014 and 2016, Beijing became more proactive in a number of Middle Eastern issues,³⁷ 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.³⁸ Thus, China's more proactive mediation role in Syria conflict is perhaps not so surprising.

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.

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.⁴⁰ Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has said that China will not take part in any coalition fighting "terrorist groups" in the Middle East.⁴¹ 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.⁴²

In January 2016, on the eve of President Xi's visit to the Middle East, the Chinese government issued its first Arab Policy Paper,⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶

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.⁴⁷

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.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹

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

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.

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. Unless the Chinese non-interference policy undergoes some changes, it may soon become irrelevant. 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.

** Dr. Mordechai Chaziza holds a Ph.D. from Bar-Ilan University. His research focuses on*

China's foreign policy in the Middle East-North Africa (MENA) region; China's relations with Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, ISIS, Pakistan; China and Arab-Israeli Peace Process, and China's non-intervention policy in intrastate wars. He is a lecturer at the Department of Politics and Governance, Ashkelon Academic College, Israel.

NOTES

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