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## Evolving Sino-Russian Cooperation in Syria

### Summary

- The Syrian civil war is entering its sixth year of conflict and is complicated by the sheer number of regional and international stakeholders and actors.
- Among nonregional actors, Russia and China have been the most significant supporters of the Bashar al-Assad regime and have jointly cast a string of vetoes in the UN Security Council, rejecting sanctions on Syria over alleged use of chemical weapons by the Assad government and efforts to oust him from power.
- Sino-Russian cooperation in Syria is driven by shared opposition to a possible US-led regime change, Beijing's antiterror and antiseparatist campaign, and Russia's support for China's policies elsewhere, including Chinese activities in the South China Sea.
- The partnership, however, is limited by divergent strategic interests in the Middle East region as well as the overall asymmetry of the relationship between Beijing and Moscow.

“ A close Sino-Russian strategic partnership could set major roadblocks for US geostrategic interests ...and disrupt existing institutional structures for global governance.”

### Introduction

A diplomatic solution to the Syrian civil war, now entering its sixth year, is complicated by the sheer number of regional and international stakeholders and actors. China and Russia's joint support for the Bashar al-Assad government and opposition to US-led interventions are major challenges for US foreign policy in Syria, the main objectives of which include deposing Assad and reducing Iran's influence. Sino-Russian cooperation is largely driven by both shared convictions against Western intervention and complementary regional interests. The future of this cooperation, however, is challenged by different strategic preferences and structural asymmetry in the partnership. Furthermore, because Syria is not a strategic priority for China, the prospect of Sino-Russian alignment depends on Russia's value as a partner elsewhere.

### Shifting Sino-Russian Relations

The relationship between China and Russia, strained for nearly thirty years, has warmed significantly since the fall of the Soviet Union. Following a series of partnership agreements, the most recent signed in 2014, Sino-Russian cooperation has entered a new stage. Bilateral trade and investment

continue to grow and intentions to strengthen economic ties are mutual. At the regional level, Beijing and Moscow plan to integrate China's Belt and Road Initiative with Russia's Eurasian Economic Union. Both countries have also jointly advocated for international financial and economic architecture reform to reflect the changing global economic landscape. Russia's political isolation by the West after its annexation of Crimea and conflict with Ukraine further drove Moscow toward China.

The two countries increasingly support each other's security and geostrategic interests as well. Moscow supports China's activity in the South China Sea, and Beijing backs Russia's intervention in Syria. Russian and Chinese navies recently conducted joint exercises in the South China Sea and the Mediterranean. Together, a close Sino-Russian strategic partnership could set major roadblocks for US geostrategic interests—which include seeking a democratic regime in Syria, enforcing the Chemical Weapons Convention, countering expanding Iranian influence in the region, and fostering regional consensus—and disrupt existing institutional structures for global governance.

## Close Sino-Russian Alignment in Syria

Preventing spillover of terrorist attacks and jihadist separatist movements from security hotspots in the Middle East and Central Asia is a top foreign policy priority for China and, beyond the broader rapprochement, a primary driver of Sino-Russian alignment in Syria. The emergence of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) has accelerated Sino-Russian security cooperation against terrorism and Islamic radicalism. Beijing first noted the presence of ethnic Uighur militants from China's western Xinjiang province in Syria in 2012.<sup>1</sup> Some fight with IS, others under their own banner for a separatist cause.<sup>2</sup> The battlefield success of the Turkistan Islamic Party in Syria has heightened Beijing's concerns about potential terrorist attacks and separatist insurgency in Xinjiang.

The 2015 antiterrorism law allows Chinese security forces to deploy abroad for counterterrorism missions—a significant departure from Beijing's otherwise strict noninterventionist policy. Some military advisers were dispatched to Syria early in 2017. This shift strengthens China's ability to deploy troops abroad, building on previous cross-border land exercises, such as the joint Chinese-Tajik antiterror exercises on the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border in October 2016, deployment of Chinese troops to China's first overseas military in Djibouti, and the successful development and commission of new heavy transport aircraft and landing platform dock vessels. Instructors from the International Special Forces Training Centre in Chechnya have provided antiterrorism training for Chinese special police forces in Xinjiang.<sup>3</sup>

From China's perspective, Russian military interventions against IS in Syria and the perceived unreliability of the United States has led to the view that cooperation with Russia offers greater strategic value. Beijing has supported Russian military strikes as being strictly antiterrorist, approved by the Syrian government, and in line with international law.<sup>4</sup> Beijing has also taken some steps toward active participation, including training Syrian troops on the use of Chinese-sold weapons and joint Sino-Russian naval exercises in the Mediterranean Sea in 2015.

China's policy coordination with Russia on Syria also reflects efforts to balance its traditional foreign policy principles of noninterference and sovereignty with an evolving and broader geopolitical outlook. Chinese public opinion views Russian operations as an adequate response to the strategic failure of the West and the disaster arising from US unilateral policies.<sup>5</sup> Both China and Russia vehemently oppose regime change and reject Western interference based on liberal ideologies, democracy, and human rights. UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which established a no-fly zone in Libya and subsequent Western military intervention in support of Libyan rebel groups, also served as a lesson for Beijing and Moscow to not hand the United States and its allies a UN-sanctioned blank check. China's abstention from the resolution, a compromise on Beijing's

part, was appreciated neither by the West nor Libya's National Transitional Council. It also did not secure Chinese economic interests in Libya.

With this experience in mind, Beijing has repeatedly opposed use of military force in support of Syrian opposition groups and considered the authorization to use "all necessary measures," a prelude to military interventions for regime change. China and Russia have vetoed a string of Western-backed UN Security Council resolutions on Syria, rejecting sanctions on Syria over alleged use of chemical weapons by the Assad government and efforts to oust Assad himself. China's insistence on including all parties, including Assad, in the peace process echoes the Russian position. Russia has reciprocated in other theaters by supporting China's activities in the South China Sea as well as jointly opposing the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system on the Korean Peninsula.

Chinese economic interests in Syria also contribute to Sino-Russian cooperation in support of the Assad government. Economic engagement in Syria throughout wartime helped carve out bigger market shares for Chinese and Russian businesses in strategic sectors of the Syrian economy and establish a favorable position in the country's reconstruction. Chinese companies have existing contracts worth \$10 billion and Beijing pledged \$6 billion in investments in December 2016. Assad has stated his strong preference for China to be a privileged partner in Syria's reconstruction.<sup>6</sup>

Russian military intervention has brought relative stability to many government-controlled parts of the country and created conditions for initial steps of economic reconstruction, making Russia a key factor in China's economic fortunes in Syria. Russian airstrikes have helped pro-government forces take control of oil fields, pipelines, and gas facilities from rebel forces and IS to regain full control of the country's hydrocarbon resources and pave the way for Chinese petroleum companies to return to Syria.<sup>7</sup>

## Limitations of Partnership

Despite the cooperation on Syria, China does not share many of Russia's regional interests or its outlook on the evolving world order. This imbalance of power and disconnect in interests may affect the potential for greater future cooperation generally. Though the vision of a multipolar global system has been a common reference point for Beijing and Moscow; Russia's readiness to use military force contradicts China's "peaceful rise."<sup>8</sup> China is a central beneficiary of the existing world order and aims to pursue an evolutionary path that would strengthen its position as a legitimate center of power. Some Russian strategists are suspicious of China's rise and still fear Chinese takeover of the Russian Far East and parts of Siberia. Beijing is immensely interested in an end to the Syrian civil war, which would provide much needed stability for expanding China's regional trade and investment ties outlined in the new Belt and Road Initiative, contrary to Russia's increasing revisionist emphasis on sustaining and prevailing in the confrontation with the West by military force in Syria.

The bilateral partnership is also influenced by their respective relationships with the United States. Strong economic relations with Washington are far more important to Beijing than increased Sino-Russian trade and investment. Just days after the Trump-Xi summit at Mar-a-Lago, China's abstention from the April 12 Security Council draft resolution that condemned the chemical weapons attack in Syria signaled Beijing's tactical accommodation.

Chinese foreign policy toward Muslim countries employs a considerable degree of bilateral diplomatic finesse to balance the sectarian divide, especially between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Russia's increasing emphasis on the use of military force as the most effective means of intervention, alignment with Iran, as well as open clashes with Saudi Arabia over the future of Assad could undermine China's credibility as a neutral power. Beijing has already noticed that pointing out Moscow's

## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

With an eye to better understanding China's strategic interests and its policy behaviors in the Middle East and Central Asia, this Peace Brief examines domestic and international forces driving Sino-Russian cooperation on Syria as well as the limits of that cooperation. Derived from an April 2017 conference on Syria held by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), this Brief is supported by USIP's China program. Yixiang Xu is a fellow at the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies.

recklessness illuminates China's own moderation and self-restraint.<sup>9</sup> Unlike Russia's, China's diplomatic efforts on Syria focus more on preventing a West-led democratic regime change while looking for a political solution to satisfy competing regional powers and less on Assad's political survival.

## Policy Recommendations: What Can the United States Do?

China supports Russia's intervention in Syria but does not consider Syria a strategic priority. The United States should encourage China's efforts to find a diplomatic solution among regional powers and actively participate in dialogues with regional partners. It is important for Washington to underscore to Beijing that Russia's insistence on prolonging the crisis in Syria contradicts both China's antiterrorist and antiseparatist efforts as well as the success of the Belt and Road Initiative in the long term. At the same time, Washington needs to step up its game to eliminate IS and, in the process, highlight Russia's military and diplomatic interventions in Syria that have helped the Assad government forces to recoup and tighten their grip on power. The United States should engage diplomatically with Russia on questions about the future of the Assad regime, a process that may be complicated by fresh US sanctions against Russia.

## Notes

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