



CHINA'S RESPONSE TO THE SYRIAN CRISIS

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There has been a lot of talk recently about severe human right violations in the context of the Syrian crisis. Even now it continues to remain in focus for all the wrong reasons. Many countries have come out rather strongly in their criticism and condemnation of the Syrian Government. The American Government led by President Obama called for limited military strikes, however this plan was stalled on account of a United Nations led plan to neutralise Syria's chemical arms. More recently the UN-Arab League Special Envoy to Syria Lakhdar Brahmini has tried pushing for the Geneva Planⁱ, agreed to in September 2012, which calls for a ceasefire and the formation of a transitional government.

What has been China's stand on this issue? It is of primary importance to see how China has reacted to this and what are its reasons. It is quite evident that China's position has been in tandem with the Russian response to the crisis. Both countries have vehemently opposed any military action in Syria. Not only this, China's position on the Syrian crisis has been consistent with its stand on most issues, that of non-interference in the affairs of other nations. But just like Russia, China too is in favour of a political settlement to the issue and has completely rejected any sort of military action as proposed by America. One of the reasons for this opposition many believe is that China is in favour of regional stability, keeping in mind its own interests. In fact the Chinese Foreign Minister is believed to have made it clear that any military action is only going to increase the instability in the region.ⁱⁱ The Government's position as reflected in the Minister's

statement is unlikely to change in the near future. China has been consistently pushing for a consensus in the United Nations Security Council for a political settlement of the crisis.

There can be several reasons for this persistence by China. One of these can be attributed to the fact that any kind of military intervention will lead to regional instability thus impacting prospects of higher oil imports. It ought to be kept in mind that China's oil imports from the West Asia exceed that of America's. Further, American dependence on West Asia for oil is only going to decrease in the years to come, with their extensive work on shale gas. The West Asia region accounts for more than 42 percent of China's oil imports.ⁱⁱⁱ Any war, even if on a small scale, or disturbance in the region could push the price of oil up consequently having an impact on China's trade with Syria^{iv}, and also impact the Chinese economy. Secondly, China, as is very evident, is also warming up to Russia. Joining forces with Russia on several issues including this one can be seen as an attempt by China to seek an ally in Russia, the principal aim being to counter America's global dominance. It is now well known that this alliance with Russia is high on the priority list of President Xi Jinping.

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China has also been sharply criticised for taking a comparatively soft stand on this issue. There has been growing clamour within certain circles for China to toughen its approach. Already Beijing has seen a mass evacuation of its citizens from Damascus as a result of regular attacks on its embassy. The population of Chinese citizens fell from 1200 in 2010 to just 30 this year. The reason for such attacks, many believe is because China vetoed three resolutions on Syria at the UN.^v Further, many commentators are of the view that China's, in a way, protection of the Assad regime can be easily explained if viewed through the prism of the civil war in Libya. A senior diplomat and an expert on China's West Asia policy believes that, "Chinese officials see the Libyan example as a terrible precedent that could lead to regime change elsewhere. They see the road from Libya leading to Damascus then Iran then North Korea and eventually to China."^{vi}

The above statement clearly shows China's anxiety of any interference in its internal affairs, especially from America. What further explains its somewhat soft stand on the severe human rights violations by the Assad regime is the fact that it doesn't quite hold a good track record in most areas of the Tibetan Plateau which it forcibly administers. So although Beijing strongly condemned the chemical weapons attack in Damascus on August 21 this year, it has been relatively cautious in blaming anyone in particular. Any blame for regime- led violations on citizens, can have serious repercussions on China too, and China realises this.

Therefore, for the reasons given above, China's response to the current crisis in Syria can be best described as being guarded, and any change in its posture is unlikely

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies CAPS)

ⁱ Zachary Raub, Jonathan Masters, *Syria's Crisis and the global response*, Council on Foreign Relations, September 11, 2013, at <http://www.cfr.org/syria/syrias-crisis-global-response/p28402> accessed on November 22, 2013.

ⁱⁱ Tim Summers, *Syrian Crisis: Diplomatic Challenge for China*, Chatham House, September 20, 2013, at <http://www.chathamhouse.org/media/comment/view/194271>, accessed on November 20, 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ Yao Jing, *War fears disrupting trade with China*, China Daily, August 30, 2013, at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2013-08/30/content_16931999.htm, accessed on November 21, 2013.

^{iv} *Ibid*

^v Jamil Anderlini, *Syrian crisis prompts calls for China to toughen foreign policy*, The Financial Times, October 15, 2013, at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/5425c3a6-3151-11e3-b478-00144feab7de.html#axzz2kyWyOQDk>, accessed on November 20, 2013.

^{vi} *Ibid*