

المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
ARAB CENTER FOR RESEARCH & POLICY STUDIES
(Doha Institute)



www.dohainstitute.org

Assessment Report

Factors Defining the Sino-Russian attitude toward the crisis in Syria

Policy Analysis Unit- ACRPS

Doha, February- 2012

Assessment Report

Contents

FACTORS DEFINING THE SINO-RUSSIAN ATTITUDE TOWARD THE CRISIS IN SYRIA.....

CHANGE IN MOROCCO: FROM UNCERTAINTY TO ACTION	2
THE REALIZATION OF NATIONAL SELF-INTEREST	4
LIBYA AS SEEN BY BEIJING AND MOSCOW: LESSONS LEARNED.....	6
AN AMBITIOUS AND UNBENDING FOREIGN POLICY.....	7
FEAR OF POLITICAL ISLAM AND THE SPREAD OF THE ARAB SPRING	9
THE LINE OF DEFENSE FOR CENTRAL ASIA STARTS IN THE ARAB COUNTRIES.....	9
CONCLUSION: THE STAKES ARE MUCH HIGHER THAN SYRIA	10

Change in Morocco: From uncertainty to action

After the escape of deposed Tunisian President, the fall of Hosni Mubarak's regime in Egypt and the start of the movement of change in other Arab countries, Moroccan officials, including the Foreign Minister Al-Fasi Al-Mehri, asserting that Morocco enjoys a special status making it immune to any protest movement, made several statements. Accordingly, the term *Moroccan exception* came into circulation. Its advocates even claimed that Tunisia and Egypt should make use of the successful Moroccan model.

The *Moroccan exception* theory is grounded on two basic arguments. The first is erroneous and unrealistic, claiming that the economic and social conditions in Morocco are far better than those in Tunisia, Egypt, and other Arab countries. Therefore, it's meaningless to stage any protest, which would only be an imitation to others. The second argument maintains that the regime in Morocco is a royal one based on the *emarat al-mumineen* (emirate of the faithful), which bestows on the regime a historical and religious legitimacy that would put it beyond any potential debate doubting its continuity.

This official discourse has angered the advocates of change in Morocco, especially considering relevant statistics, including official statistics, contradict the regime's claim of economic prosperity. This is in addition to the predicament and gridlock that have long plagued political and social conditions in Morocco.

In this context, it's advisable to look at recent World Bank statistics released on Wednesday, July 6, 2011, which revealed that Morocco is still stuck in the lowest category of medium-income countries. The annual average per capita income ranges from \$1,006 to \$3,975. Comparing Morocco with other countries of the world, one can see that economic and social indicators in Morocco are still low. Indeed, some countries whose economic and social conditions were worse than those of Morocco have achieved some progress along the world ranking. Certain countries, such as Zambia, Ghana and Mauritania, which were classified as low-income countries, have moved up to lower-middle income countries. Other countries, with similar conditions to those of Morocco, have moved up, making the leap to the upper-middle income countries; these include countries such as China, Equator, Jordan, Thailand, and Tunisia.

As for the indicators of poverty, World Bank recent statistics showed that the poorest 20 percent of the population consumes only 8.5 percent of Morocco's national income, whereas the richest 20 percent of the population controls 47 percent of the country's national income. The World Bank figures, moreover, showed that the adult illiteracy rate (i.e., population above 15 years of age) in Morocco is as high as 56 percent.

In a report issued in the first week of July 2011, the Moroccan Human Rights Center accused the regime of continuing political arrests, and provided evidence of this accusation by referring to the arrest and trial of journalist Rasheed Neeny, the managing editor of the daily newspaper *al-Masa* newspaper, as well as the use of force against the protestors during the February 20 Movement for Change. The Center called upon the government to take speedy measures to abolish the privilege system, and to dismember the 'lobbies' network, which are thriving on the current rentier economy.

In its annual report, July 12, 2011, the Moroccan Association for Human Rights Society said the general assessment of the human rights situation in Morocco clearly shows that Morocco is still far away from the basic requirements of the state of law and rights.

On February 20, 2011 independent, youthful groups, in addition to the opposition's political, Islamic youth groups, demanded the punishment of the Assad regime. The Chinese and Russians both used their veto powers at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to quash an attempt to punish Syria, which is a long-standing ally of the Russians, through international means; the remaining 13 members of the UNSC, Permanent and otherwise, voted in favor of the motion. Yet both Russia and China remain eager not to alienate themselves from those countries, particularly members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, who wish to see Syria punished. This paper examines some of the driving forces for the Assad regime's survival. Official Russian statements notwithstanding, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's visit to Damascus on February 7, 2012 failed to add impetus to the Arab League's initiative to resolve the current crisis in Syria. While Interfax, a Russian news agency, quoted Lavrov as saying that "Assad is keen to see the Arab Observer Mission in Syria expanded, and for it to continue its work", the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states announced that they were expelling Syria's ambassadors and simultaneously withdrawing their missions from Damascus. In the wording of the GCC statement, these moves came after the "Syrian regime thwarted all the other sincere Arab efforts to end this conflict and put a stop to the bloodshed in Syria". As soon as Lavrov returned to Moscow, the Chinese, who recently had sided with the Russians in vetoing a resolution against the Assad regime at the United Nations Security Council, hastened to assert that they were "committed to friendship with the Arab world", showing their awareness of Arab fury at their Security Council position.

With the other 13 members of the council having voted for the resolution, these two permanent members now appear to be standing in the face of what otherwise would have been an international consensus in favor of a joint Arab-Western draft which would have brought about a gradual transfer of power in Syria. The question posed by many observers now is: why this Sino-Russian obduracy in the face of what many saw as the lowest common denominator for international action on the Syrian crisis? There is no single, straightforward answer to this question.

Syria's internal complexities are reflected in the intricacies of the theoretical frameworks and hypotheses employed to understand international reactions to the Sino-Russian position. Some of these are specific to either China or Russia, while others apply to both countries at once. Beyond purely "ideological" justifications for the Sino-Russian attitude toward Syria, there are also realpolitik considerations, based on the economic and strategic considerations of the two countries. No single explanation which completely explains the entirety of either the Chinese or the Russian stance.

Certain individual factors include:

1. National self-interest
2. The lessons of Libya
3. Foreign policy aims and objectives of the two powers
4. Fear of the spread of political Islam and the possible spread of the Arab Spring
5. Ensuring that Central Asia and the Caucasus are defended

The Sino-Russian stance on Syria comes at a time of deep financial crisis sweeping the entire world, affecting particularly the European Union and the United States. This context is significant as it led to the situation where the Obama Administration is trying to reduce military spending and expansion around the world. This implies that the US will draw back their military presence around the world. Instead, the US will move toward a model of integrated, small-scale and rapidly deployable forces; forces which have a smaller "foot print" and rely on technological innovation and superiority instead of bulk force, as is made clear in public domain documents published by the Pentagon¹. In tandem with this, the Chinese and, particularly, the Russians have been trying to expand their traditional spheres of influence on the world stage, trying to translate their relative economic power into geostrategic positions.

The realization of national self-interest

Syria's primary role as a player in the Arab-Israeli conflict and other regional conflicts cannot be ignored, but it is highly unlikely that the Russians and the Chinese based their positions on the ostensible implications of such a policy for these disputes. Observers who suggest that there is no such link argue that neither Beijing nor Moscow has any interest in supporting the Palestinian resistance, especially those Palestinian factions which have used Damascus as a base. The Russians in particular, as part of the International Quartet of Middle East peace brokers backing

¹ Department of Defense, "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense", January 5, 2012:

http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf

the American consensus on resolution of the Palestinian question, are not in a position to substantially alter the status quo. Arab observers who see contemporary Russia, with its remnants of former KGB officials (including President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin) at the highest levels, as the heir of the former Soviet Union are fooling themselves. Nonetheless, others have noted the anger at the United States and Israel which has been evident during protests in Arab countries long aligned with US policy. It would have seemed obvious, then, that the Chinese and the Russians would want to capitalize on the United States' prospective loss of status in the Arab Middle East.² How else would the Chinese and the Russians capitalize on this situation if they did not stand with the Arab masses against their regimes?

In actual fact, the reverse has happened: while initially taken by surprise, the United States unexpectedly completed a volte-face and began to encourage some Arab autocrats, its former allies, to leave power and facilitate transfers of power. As time went on, it became clear that Russian and Chinese foreign policy-makers were not as adept at making rapid changes to account for the revolutionary spirit sweeping through Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria. Some would suggest that this inability to deal with the new reality is in fact the result of an intentional policy on the part of China and Russia. This view is based on the idea that Russia and China, are determined to ensure that the prestige of any individual nation-state is never violated, particularly by the use of international mechanisms such as those employed by the United Nations. Neither of these two states will go sing from this hymn book, which they perceive to have been written by the West. In order for China and Russia to maintain their images as great powers, each must also maintain the distinctiveness of its voice. For Russia, this takes on special importance as Putin heads into a campaign to regain the presidency; for China, maintaining an independent voice is important for its own domestic reasons as a rising economic power.

Another factor impacting Russian domestic politics is the emergence of the Eurasia Party. The Eurasia Party, born in May of 2001, and later the Eurasia movement, announced their fealty to Putin, who quickly took the party under his wing.³ It is the ideology of this movement which many take to be the departure point for the Russian attitude toward the Syrian situation. The Eurasia Party, founded by Aleksandr Dugin, takes a view which many see as a nationalist answer to the post-communist era. To the Eurasianists, Russia's new role is to be a common homeland, not just for Slavic Russians but also for the Tatars and others; for them, "the Eurasian continent is fated to be a great empire whether it is run by Tatar khans, Russian Tsars or Bolsheviks"⁴; what is important to Dugin's party is that Eurasia has always stood as a binary opposite to the West.⁵ There is much to recommend the notion that Dugin's movement has infiltrated the state security apparatus of Russia and is influential within Putin's inner circle. Of course, that China sees itself as having been fated to play a similar historical role in terms of competing Western hegemony goes without saying. Undoubtedly, these concepts of a glorious destiny will inevitably

² Nazir Hussain, "Unrest and Revolt in the Arab World: Impact on Regional Security", *Pakistan Horizon*, July 2011, Vol. 64 Issue 3, p43-58.

³ Caroline Humphrey, "Eurasia, Ideology and the political imagination in provincial Russia", In: C.M. Hann (Edited by), *Postsocialism, Ideals, ideologies and practices in Eurasia*, (London & New York, Routledge, 2002), p. 258.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 262

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 263

bring these countries into conflict with the West on the world stage. This reality was brought home by a Chinese newspaper when it published an article stating that “the world must get used to China speaking hard truths about disputes such as Syria, saying its veto of the U.N. resolution showed China would be no “rubber stamp.”⁶

On another level, the fact that both Russia and China have their own “democracy deficits” also needs to be considered. Neither of these countries pays more than lip service to democracy at home, abroad, or across their respective spheres of economic, political and social influence. If they haven’t bothered to promote democracy anywhere else, why should they be relied on to do so in Syria?

Libya as seen by Beijing and Moscow: Lessons learned

Another theoretical attempt to understand the Sino-Russian position on Syria is to view it through the lens of the Libya experience. As far as the Russians and the Chinese were concerned, the difficulties of the Arab Spring really only started with the fall of Colonel Moammar Ghaddafi; both Tunisia’s Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak were toppled without the intervention of foreign powers. At a time when Western governments were riding the revolutionary wave against their erstwhile allies (albeit belatedly and grudgingly, with the notable exception of France), Russia and China maintained positions of official ambiguity. This prevarication continued, and in fact the Libyan situation did not make things any clearer as the Russians saw in Ghaddafi an old friend, and the Chinese had their own share of petroleum projects in the country to look after. Even after France, which also had commercial interests in Libya, had taken the lead in efforts to oust the former Libyan dictator, responding to calls within the country for outside assistance, the Chinese and the Russians maintained their opposition to any foreign intervention.

Nevertheless, the two countries did not stand in the way of UNSC Resolution 1973, of March 17, 2011, which imposed a no-fly zone over Libya and authorized participating member states to authorize all necessary measures to protect civilians. At the time, the anti-Ghaddafi coalition had loaded this initiative with excessive additional meanings, and both Russia and China abstained, paving the way for NATO-led military intervention. The no-fly zone allowed the application of considerable air power, namely Naval Aviation, first by France and then by several other countries, including Italy, Britain and the United States. In terms of the matrix of international relations, the results of these actions included not just the end of Ghaddafi’s regime, but also that of Russian influence in Libya, and the reduction of the Chinese to bystander status. Seen from

⁶ “China says may send envoy to discuss Syria crisis”, *Reuters*, February 7, 2012
<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/07/us-china-syria-idUSTRE81607S20120207>

this perspective, many observers can see why events in Libya left the Chinese and the Russians embittered.⁷

Sino-Russian abstention on Resolution 1973 is not evidence of approval for it. Both China and Russia have yet to gain anything from the new situation prevailing in Libya, which came about as a result of NATO action. Regardless of what shape the coming government in Libya takes, the North African country will, at least for the time being, be part of the Western-dominated security and strategic fabric, and so does not hold out much promise for either Russia or China in terms of arms deals. These kinds of [geopolitical] interests also explain the way in which the Chinese and the Russians stand beside the Syrian government. This position was articulated in a joint statement released on the occasion of Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to Russia in June 2011. Using words attributed to the leaders of both countries, the statement argued that "The parties agreed that the situation in the Middle East and North Africa must also be resolved by political means. The parties strongly believe the disputes must be settled peacefully and believe that outside forces must not interfere in the internal processes of the region's states."⁸ In the end, both leaders underlined their unchanging approach to Syria: at the end of the day, they would be supporting the Syrian regime.

An ambitious and unbending foreign policy

Observers who focus on this (partial) explanation for the Sino-Russian stance point to the fact that Syria is not a new part of the Russian sphere of influence, rather an ally bequeathed to the Russia of Putin and Medvedev by the former Soviet Union. A similar point could be made of China: while its economy has been liberalized, its foreign policy has been shaped by multipolarity, and it clings to this vision of the world as it becomes a rising power. The cliché, made popular in the earliest years of the century, of a Russia rising from a deep slumber, also fit in with the newly resurgent China, eager to share in the spoils of prosperity, on an equal footing with other countries.⁹ Through it all, China's leadership was keen to present itself as one which would rise to create a modern country without pushing other countries out of the way, and which would be willing to share its prosperity with other nations.¹⁰

⁷ Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin criticized the UNSCR 1973 by saying that "it is, surely, flawed and lame...it allows intervention in a sovereign country." The Russian president Medvedev stated two months later that "It is sad that these resolutions can be manipulated." See

Pavel K. Baev, "Russia's Counter-Revolutionary Stance Toward the Arab Spring", *Insight Turkey*, Vol.13, N.3, 2011, pp.11-19.

⁸ Talks of President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev with President of China Hu Jintao, *Press-release* June 17, 2011

http://www.thailand.mid.ru/Win_work/Prez_Reliz2010/PR_17062011.htm

⁹ Evgenii Verlin & Vladislav Inozemtsev, "Russia-China: Time for a Course Correction", *Russian Politics & Law*, Nov/Dec2011, Vol. 49 Issue 6, pp. 54-73.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Proponents of this view also affirm that the overall aim of Chinese foreign policy is to further its own economic development. This explains the Chinese policy of creating “corridors of good neighborliness” and “areas of shared prosperity” along the country’s borders, paying special attention to those countries it considers “important”, whether because of their rich natural resources, their access to high technology, or their systems of innovation.¹¹ China’s preferred method of exerting influence is to use “soft power”, relying on proactive economic integration as well as developmental and investment partnership.

An interesting survey of this increase in China’s use of soft power is to be found in a study published by the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School for Public Service at New York University, which pointed out that Chinese state-funded assistance and subsidized economic packages in a number of countries in Latin America, Africa and South Asia witnessed a rapid increase in the period from 2002 to 2006, rising from USD 1 billion to USD 27.5 billion; by 2007, this number had settled to USD 25 billion.¹² One conclusion often arrived at by people who adopt this view is that Chinese aid policies are completely identical to American ones; in other words, they provide a natural prelude to, and convenient cover for, the exertion of influence in arenas of Cold War conflict. Particularly since the end of the Cold War, this type of soft power has been a highly effective way for the United States to project unbridled power.

While the Syrian regime might not have been a significant client for China, the broader Middle East, and especially Syria’s main ally, Iran, are of particular interest to Beijing. This is the region from which China receives 58% of its crude oil imports,¹³ and China is the single largest customer for Iranian crude. The overall size of the energy trade between the two countries is estimated at approximately USD 120 billion.¹⁴ Other reports indicate that the Chinese have even considered supplying the Syrians with technologies relating to weapons of mass destruction,¹⁵ but these are likely to be smokescreen allegations designed to warn Syria against any attempt to achieve strategic balance with Israel.

This point of view also presents an important distinction between Chinese and Russian methods for the exertion of influence: while the former is open to the use of soft power, the latter still relies on military production as a key to influence in other countries. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the value of Russian arms sales to Syria amounted to USD 162 million between 2009 and 2010; while this might not be a huge number in terms of the strategic relations between two countries, the overall value of extant Russian weapons supply contracts with Syria stands at about USD 4 billion. In addition, the Syrians allow Russia to

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Thomas Lum, Hannah Fisher, Julissa Gomez-Granger, Anne Leland, “China’s Foreign Aid Activities in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia”, *Congressional Research Service Report*, February 25, 2009.
<http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/120979.pdf>

¹³The *Institute for the Analysis of Global Security* (IAGS) predicted that the Middle East oil exports to China reach around 70 percent of China’s global oil imports by 2015. For further details, see

“Fueling the dragon: China’s race into the oil market”, *The Institute for the Analysis of Global Security*:
<http://www.iags.org/china.htm>

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*

operate a naval base at the Syrian port of Tartous, giving Moscow its only foothold on the Mediterranean.

Fear of political Islam and the spread of the Arab spring

One might ask the question: how do China and Russia put themselves in a situation in which they oppose, not just to the Syrian popular revolt, but the Arab Spring as a whole? One answer is hinted at in the question of Central Asia¹⁶, a source of concern shared by both China and Russia. For people who adopt this view, the Arab Spring is sweeping eastward: beginning in Tunisia, the revolution has now germinated in Syria; following an abortive movement in Iraq in March 2011, the question remains: where next? The obvious answers are Iran and the Caucasus region. Given the rise of Islamists to power via elections in Tunisia and Egypt, China and Russia have cause for concern that political Islam will next infect countries in their own backyards.

These fears are lent credibility by the political violence in and Central Asia prior to the Arab Spring. It was only by happenstance that the regimes in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were able to quell uprisings among their respective populations. A number of analysts have argued that the situation in the mostly Muslim countries of Central Asia remain very unsettled. Television images of the mounting protests stretching from Tunis to Sanaa and from Cairo to Damascus are of no help to the rulers of Central Asian republics bent on keeping their oppositions in check.

The region is of vital interest to both the Chinese and the Russians, both of whom are locked in a struggle – often undeclared – with the United States over control of the area. The strategic importance of this region lies in its natural resources and in the oil pipelines which Russia and China rely on to be able to continue their drive for economic development. As far as the Chinese are concerned, they [need to maintain their] position as the “Economic Leaderleader” of Eurasia; China is already the main trading partner and largest investor in a number of these countries, including Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. All four of these also are old bastions of Russian influence, and have been since Soviet days. Analysts who adopt this view also believe that these countries are all susceptible to tremors of political unrest, particularly given the activities of political Islamists inspired by events in the Arab countries.

The line of defense for Central Asia starts in the Arab countries

Analyzing the Sino-Russian approach to the Syrian revolution requires an understanding of the matrix of their interests, which come in two forms: economic and geostrategic. The Syrian market holds little promise for either the Chinese or the Russians, and this will likely remain the case, regardless of the fate of the regime.¹⁷ The perilous situation of the Assad regime, which

¹⁶About the importance of Caucasus and Central Asia for Russia, see Pavel K. Baev, *op.cit.*

¹⁷“Effects of sanctions on Syria’s macroeconomy in 2012”, Policy Analysis Unit, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, January 1, 2012

<http://english.dohainstitute.org/Home/Details?entityID=5ea4b31b-155d-4a9f-8f4d-a5b428135cd5&resourceId=75679760-3be5-4fb4-8dcb-56a3e58845ed>

some believe is unlikely to survive another 18 months, makes doing business with Syria (especially money transfers, direct investments and commercial trade), very risky. Syria's Gross Domestic Product growth has fallen from an average of 4.9% in 2006-2010 to less than 2% during 2011, and is projected to shrink to around 1.8% between 2012 and 2016. During the same period, the rate of inflation in Syria is likely to rise to 9.1%, and the government budget is predicted to deliver a deficit of USD 3.5 billion.¹⁸ In reality, therefore, there is only the geostrategic factor left to consider.

Some analysts take the view that China needs to balance its aim of not angering the Russians with its desire not to upset the United States and the West in general. At the same time, these analysts say, the Chinese have no pressing urge to exert direct influence on the Central Asian states. Nonetheless, the Chinese apparently feel compelled to be proactive about defending their ability to exercise such influence if and when the need arises. In practical terms, this means that both the Chinese and the Russians see the first line of defense for their strategic interests as lying in the Arab countries.

One particular cause of concern for both powers is the large number of Muslims within their own borders.. In China, Muslims account for approximately 2% of the population, or around 25 million people; in Russia, Muslims make up an estimated 25 million persons out of a total of 145 million [a far more substantial amount of the population]. Further complicating matters for the Russians is the geographical distribution of its Muslim population, which is concentrated in areas of high strategic sensitivity, including the Caucasus, the Black Sea coast, and the Volga River Basin, and stretching as far as Siberia and the Ural Mountains. Muslims also make up the native populations of some of the autonomous republics such as Chechnya, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, the Crimea, Chuvashia, Mordovia and Bashkortan, in addition to non-autonomous regions within Russia.

Both the Russians and the Chinese look on such population centers with trepidation. They fear not only the extension of US, EU and Japanese influence but also inroads by Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. None of these prospects would make the Chinese or the Russians very happy.

Conclusion: The stakes are much higher than Syria

What can be concluded from the foregoing is that the importance of Syria to Russia and China goes beyond the borders of Syria itself, important though the Arab region and the Arab-Israeli conflict may be to both powers. Instead, a multiplicity of factors is driving Russian and Chinese policy, no single one of which can explain the totality of the Sino-Russian position on Syria.

Russia's "geographical misfortune", and historic need for access to warm water ports, is one factor explaining Moscow's stance on Syria, but it is not the only factor. It is in fact a point on which the Russians are [likely] to be prepared to negotiate to preserve their own interests. China, on the other hand, will need to maintain good relations with its key energy suppliers, which include Iran and Saudi Arabia, two countries with vastly differing approaches to the Syrian revolution.

¹⁸ "Syria Country Report", *Political Risk Services*, November 2011. PRS Group Inc. USA.

Any change in the Chinese and Russian positions will be based on a reformulation of the geopolitical framework, one which is negotiated with the main stakeholders in the changes currently underway in the Arab countries, and on the prospective repercussions of such changes on Central Asia and the Caucasus. During such a negotiation process – which may already be underway behind the scenes – a resolution may be arrived at, one which preserves the interests of both Russia and China, at least partially, in the reshuffle of regional order presently taking place. It should be noted here that the UN Security Council, and the latest Russian and Chinese vetoes, might not be the final arbitrator of the Syrian regime's fate.