

Chinese military strategy in Syria

Motivations of change and its implications



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Situation
Estimation

Ayham Maqdisy Al-Khatib





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TURKEY - GAZIANTEP
info@jusoor.co
www.jusoor.co

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Introduction:

China's stand on the Syrian crisis was not very effective in the direct influence the to the events in Syria, where it is trying to enhance its role in the Syrian file.

This role has been limited to the support of international political efforts targeted to find political solution for Syrian issue, with direct diplomatic and military support for the Syrian regime which appeared in China's use to veto in the security council four times against decisions related to the course of events in Syria, which were seeking to condemn the Syrian regime anyway, and the first was voting against a draft resolution by European proposal and an American support in 2011 to condemn the Syrian regime's suppress protests against it in Syria¹.

Then, in 2012 followed by a China's veto on a draft of a resolution which demands changing the regime in Syria, and in the same year, also opposed the proposed resolution that threaten the Syrian regime with sanctions if it does not withdrawal its forces and military mechanisms from cities and areas that have demonstrations against it. The final chines veto was in 2014, against a decision aims to refer the war crimes committed in Syria to the international criminal court.²

China is seeking to enhance its military activity cautiously in Syria, admiral Joan Youvi" visited Damascus on 14.8.2016 where he met officials from the Syrian regime in order to support the training program for Syrian regime's forces, and provide humanitarian aid by the China's army³.

This move was not the first, media reports in late 2015 talked that China sent a military ship to Syria, carrying many of Chinses military advisors to support the Syrian regime⁴ . On the other hand, government of Beijing denied these

1 "Russian -Chinses veto against the draft of resolution on the west of Syria" daily Chinses people , 20.7.2012. The link:

<https://goo.gl/rly3na>

2 Russian -Chinses Vito prevents referring the Syrian file to the international criminal " German DW, 22.5.104. The link:

<https://goo.gl/j2ravx>

3 senior Chinses officer visits Syria " Anadoul Agency, 18.8.2016, the link:

<https://goo.gl/vwcn9p>

4 "China's military advisers heading to Syria to help fight ISIS'. RT, 28-9-2015.

URL:

<https://goo.gl/wu7tu8>

Information ⁵, but the question must be asked about seeking of Beijing to get more effective military role in Syria, especially since the white paper which determine the military strategy of China issued the last year considers the security of energy, active defensive and enhancing the external military relations, in addition to fighting terrorism are the most important bases for protecting the national security ⁶.

Beijing has several considerations to increase its military activity in Syria , the most important of them maybe to reduce the developing influence of Turkistan fighters' activity in Syria , who are fighting alongside the armed opposition and many of them are Uighur , who are the majority inhabiting Xinjiang province in China , as well as China considers them a terrorists and threaten the national security of China , and this is different from Russia which had a military intervention alongside the Syrian regime under the pretext to fight terrorism , which raising doubts about the possibility of military partnership between the two countries in order to intensify military operations in Syria , especially since China supports the Russian military forces in Syria⁷.

5 Report: "China says not planning to send military ships to Syria". Reuters, 14-10-2015. URL :

<https://goo.gl/w0lcbe>

6 Full text: China's Military Strategy. China Daily, 26-5-2015. URL:

<https://goo.gl/mpjuyt>

7 "China supports Russia's efforts in Syria." Sputnik, 12.04.2015. The link:

<https://goo.gl/Wm7k0X>

Causes of change in the Chinese military strategy in Syria:

Protecting security of energy for China is one of the most important bases in its military strategy, as it seeks to reduce the size of risk on its increasing commercial growing through ensuring the necessary energy resources. Especially oil, to continue this growing.

China is the second importer for oil in the world after USA, where the average of China's import of oil is 6.7 million barrel per day⁸, and it is expected that the need of oil will grow to reach more high rates in the coming years, so China grants great importance for covering these needs through building many economic partnerships with energy producing countries such as Russia, Iran and Arab countries in the middle east such as Saudi Arabia.

Beijing is also seeking to expand the economic activity through applying the plan of new silk road "announced by the Chinese president " Xi Jinping" in 2013 to enhance the economic cooperation through creation the network of old sea lanes to create the maritime silk road, to promote the international connectivity and support the movement of trading.

This way will connect Asia, Africa and Europe where it crosses 65 states⁹ including Syria which is a transportation knot from central Asia and Caucasus to Europe and the Arab gulf, thus, the new silk road plan will insure China's various energy needs, particularly oil, in addition to expand its exports market to include more countries

On the other hand, it seems that Beijing will try to support its previous plan aimed to reducing risks related to energy security, through enhancing its military presence in the import onshore and offshore roads to China, which explains the links between the energy security with the China military strategy.

8 "China is at the forefront of importers of Russian crude oil." Russia Today, 14.03.2016. The link:

<https://goo.gl/a1gxrt>.

9 what is the silk road which Egypt joined to connect the world commercially? Al-Arabia news, 21.2.2016, the link:

<https://goo.gl/bphpcc>

China has moved towards it on 2015, so it contributed in financing the port of Kuadar in Pakistan on the Arabian sea, close to the strait of Hormuz, and through which about 40% of the oil that consumed in the world.¹⁰

Administration of this port was transferred to China, which established a naval military base in it after an offer provided by the Pakistani government in 2013¹¹, and this considered one of the most important strategic steps taken by Beijing, which the naval base has enabled it to secure the safety of ships passing through it, as well as to monitor the naval movement of India and USA in that region.

China is also establishing currently a military base in Djibouti, according to the agreement between the two governments and the base will start operation in 2017, and China will disseminate approximately 10 thousand soldier. And the base has a strategic location because Djibouti overlooks Bab Al-Mandab and has military bases for US, Japan, France and Italy¹² which will enable Beijing's control the military activity of these bases, especially the US base, and ensuring the road of ships carrying imports from Africa across the red sea and Arab sea in the Arab gulf all the way to China.

Especially because Iran's ambition to support its military and economic power, which have been affected negatively, after the Iranian military intervention in Syria and confront the economic sanctions over its nuclear program.

In other words, any military or economic threat would happen to Iran, it will threaten China's energy security significantly, therefore China will work to fend these threats through the development of partnership with Iran, especially in the military field.

As for the relations between Russia and China , related to military activity and energy sources , China is one of the first importers of Russian oil¹³ ,

10 "Chinese naval base in Pakistan." Sputnik, 11.05.2011., the Link:

<https://goo.gl/8qrnhp>

11 "Chinese naval base in Pakistan causing concern of India and America." Russia Today, 18.02.2013. The link:

<https://goo.gl/6nkymh>

12 "Saudi Arabia and China are racing to establish military bases in Djibouti. Why now?". Huffington Post Arabic, 19.08.2016, the link:

<https://goo.gl/Ejmvwi>

13 "Iran's oil exports to China rise by 20 percent." Mehr Iranian news agency, 02.06.2016. The link:

<https://goo.gl/1snblc>

on the grounds that Russia is the oil producing country which is the closest to China , allowing China to import oil through land and sea routes at lower cost and shorter time¹⁴ , therefore China looking forward to enhance the partnership level or keep it active with Russia at all levels , also for military activity between the two countries, it grow in the coordination of common military exercises , which the last was in the east of Zhanjiang in the province of Guangdong southern of China¹⁵.

Also, there were common maneuvers in the Mediterranean in mid-2015¹⁶, and the military cooperation were not only about maneuvers, but also Russia is one of the most important countries that export weapons to China¹⁷.

Therefore, it is expected to increase Chinese military activity in Syria but cautiously to some extent, especially with countries that support departure of head of Syrian regime Bashar Al-Assad, and opposes the Russian and Iranian intervention in Syria.

14 "China is at the forefront of importers of Russian crude oil." Russia Today, 14.03.2016. The link:

<https://goo.gl/a1gxrt>

15 "China and Russia hold common naval exercises." CCTV Arabic, 11-9-2016. The link:

<https://goo.gl/pkpzev>

16 "Starting the chinses-Russian common naval maneuvers in the Mediterranean." Russia Today, 17.05.2015. The link:

<https://goo.gl/lyxdjo>

17 global weapon, Russia is the second source, India is the first buyer" Russia Today, 16.03.2015. The link:

<https://goo.gl/jqgnk3>

Turkestan threat in Syria on China's national security:

Turkestan is located in east of Asia that divided into two parts: east Turkestan and west Turkestan.

The east Turkestan is known now as Xinjiang that China annexed it to its land in 1949¹⁸, while the western one includes states of Turkestan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and the inhabitants' origins is Turk ethnic from different tribes¹⁹.

Uighurs is Muslim minority in Xinjiang (East Turkistan) in China, and they rejected the annexation of their region to the lands of Chinese state in 1949, and there were many popular protests against Chinese government's policy in dealing with the region's population, then developed to be an armed confrontation with the Chinese authorities due to the repressive policy pursued by China over years²⁰ what led to emergence of signs the extremism.

Most of Uighurs are Muslims and they have effected by Jihadist movements in Afghanistan and Chechnya, the first armed jihadist group appeared in the region that called (East Turkistan Islamic movement).

In 1993, which called for establishing the Islamic state in east Turkestan (Xinjiang)

And the group began its actual activity in 1997, after Hasan Mahsum became a leader of the movement²¹, he went to Afghanistan and coordinated with leaders of Qaeda there, and the movement of east Turkestan sought to attract Uighurs young to fight in its ranks, and was killed after years by airstrike in 2003²².

18 "Uighurs fighting in Syria." Top News from the forgotten East Turkistan, 30.10.2012. The link:

<https://goo.gl/qjwmvw>

19 Turkestan, English Oxford Living Dictionary. URL:

<https://goo.gl/lfknid>

20 Report: "Why is there tension between China and the Uighurs?". BBC, 26-9-2014. The link:

<https://goo.gl/coqhaf>

21 Report: "China :The Evolution of ETIM". Stratfor, 13-5-2008. URL:

<https://goo.gl/dcs3bu>

22 "East Turkistan Islamic organization. Qaeda allies in south of China." Gate of Islamic movements, 02.04.2015. The link:

<https://goo.gl/ho18xz>

The Chinese government has been able to reduce the activity of the movement by security measures in Xinjiang and included the movement on the lists of terrorism of China, Russia, USA and UN²³.

These measures contributed to reduce the threat of movement on the Chinese national security but many Turkistan fighters went to fight in Syria which help the movement to re-operate via Syria this time and reorganize itself again and renew their networks with those associated with them ideologically in Syria, which has turned into a significant polarization point for the Jihadists in eastern and central of Asia.

The effects of Turkestan movement's activity, especially the East on the nature of actions in Turkistan where recently carried out the attack on the Chinese Embassy in in the capital of Kyrgyzstan, "Bishkek"²⁴, which means escalating security threat to China. It is estimated that 1500-1000 Uighur fighter went to Syria²⁵ from China to fight alongside the Syrian opposition, and their role appeared clearly when the opposition factions took control over Jesr Al-Shoughour in Idleb southern of Syria in 2015²⁶.

Regarding to the Chinese government , it will confront their activities effectively especially since they threaten the national security of China so, China will seek to intensify military efforts and coordination with its allies to limit Turkstanyen activity and monitor it or any other areas they in west Turkistan , so the Chinese government has a challenge and big impediments to protect its national security according to the (active defensive) in the Chinese military strategy which is (we will not attack unless we are attacked m but we will launch anti - attack if we are attacked".

This strategy allows it to strike or participate more effectively, such as sending military advisors as well as the Russians, who are coordinating their operation with the Syrian regime.

23 "Q & A about the East Turkestan Islamic Movement." BBC, 11.01.2013. The link: <https://goo.gl/rmjjuj>

24 "Kyrgyzstan: The Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement responsible for the Chinese Embassy in the capital, Bishkek attack." CCTV Arabic, 7-9-2016. The Link: <https://goo.gl/6kvj22>

25 Report: "The East Turkestan Islamic Movement". Modern Diplomacy, 30-5-2016. The link: <https://goo.gl/iicsov>

26 "Turkestan Islamic Party, a new faction is leading major operations in the north of Syria." Al Sharq Al Awsat, 09.22.2015. The link: <https://goo.gl/ajiybn>

In China, it has recently tested 21 new pieces of security equipment to fight terrorism in Xinjiang in order to enhance the security in the region²⁷ which reflects the government wants to active its military activity internally and externally in order to fend off the rising threat of Turkstanyen on the national security of the country²⁸.

The effects of China's military effectiveness on the actors in the Syrian file:

It seems that the Chinese government is moving cautiously to increase military and security activity within the borders of the country and abroad, especially in Syria, but this will impact on China's foreign policy in the form of diplomatic relations with the active states in Syrian affairs, and specifically with United States and Turkey; due to the impact of these two countries clearly on the path of the Syrian crisis as well as Russia.

Regarding to the change which may arise on the Sino-Turkish relations, it is likely that the effect of this change will not be significant, where both countries raised the level of partnership in 2010 to the strategic partnership especially regarding to the economic side.

The trade exchange between the two countries at the end of 2015 was about 20.2 billion dollars and it is expected that the ratio will raise in the future due to Chinese seeking to apply the plan of "new silk road"²⁹.

Politically, it is known that turkey took a stand against the Syrian regime, but it is seeking to strengthen the relations with Russia which is the ally of China and Syrian regime which means that the Turkish foreign policy is not inconsistent with building international partnerships, especially in the economic part which will not affect the Turkish stand of the Syrian affairs m so China will not stop strengthen its relations with Syrian regime and Russia regarding to the Syrian affairs.

27 "China tests new equipment in Xinjiang exercises to fight terrorism." Reuters, 08.16.2016. The link:

<https://goo.gl/xqz5lt>

28 Abdul Wahab Assi and Ayham Maqdesi al-Khatib, "black horse of terrorism 2 (Emirate of Turkestan in the land of Sham)." Asbar Center for Studies and Research, 04.10.2015. The link:

<https://goo.gl/8ueegd>

29 "China and Turkey seeking to deepen relations and mutual trust." Cn Arabic News, 16-11-2015. The link:

<https://goo.gl/imgs5e>

With regard to Sino-US relations, the partnership between the two countries are intertwined and very complicated, economically, Washington's most important economic partners for Beijing³⁰, and the last is the third largest economic partner for Washington, so any change in the economic level in both countries will affect one way or another on the other's economy; on the grounds they are one of the largest industrial and economic state in the world, so it is not in the interest of both sides in the near or medium term that seek to tense economic relations between them.

On the political and military terms, there are several controversial files between the two sides, most important is the dispute over the maritime border, in Southern Sea of China area, which recently was the cause of the escalation of the diplomatic discourse between the two countries, after a decision by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, which "gives diplomatic arguments enough to Philippines which filed a complaint in the Southern Sea of China area issue, that prompting Beijing government to warn United States of the danger of a military conflict in the region in response to this decision³¹.

On the other hand, it seems that relations between the two countries has not seen decisive steps to resolve their contentious issues despite the Chinese president's visit in 2015 to Washington to meet US President Barack Obama, where the two sides agreed to continue moving in order to build a new form of relations,³² but what happened long ago when China did not commit to perform the reception of President Barack Obama's ceremony, during the top twenty³³, returned to raise doubts again about the possibility of easing diplomatic tensions between the two countries, but this is likely to cause significant negative impacts the relationship with the United States level, as a result for increasing activity of China's military in Syria.

Especially if China did so alongside with Russia, that it will increase the effectiveness of the Russian intervention in Syria, one way or another, which make Washington considers it is likely to deepen the crisis between

30 "Sino-US relations intertwined interests and the limits of the differences." China today, 10.22.2015. The link:

<https://goo.gl/9vfn3d>

31 "Beijing warned Washington of the conflict in the Southern Sea of China." Russia Today, 13.07.2016. The link:

<https://goo.gl/fwioxa>

32 "China and Turkey seeking to deepen relations and mutual trust." Cn Arabic News, 16-11-2015. The link:

<https://goo.gl/imgs5e>

33 "Humiliating reception for Obama in China." Sky News, 9.4.2016. The Link:

<https://goo.gl/UH5OLG>

them and the Russians on the one hand, and between them and China on the other hand, thus China must find negotiating track with the United States leading the international alliance against terrorism, would enhance military effectiveness in Syria, but in coordination with the international alliance within the framework of participation in international efforts targeting to reduce the threat of terrorism in the region.



جسور للدراسات
JUSOOR for STUDIES

Kavalik Mah. Fevzi Çakmak CD.
Sevil Apt. N11 D8, 27060
Gaziantep - Turkey
+90 537 558 5821

info@jusoor.co

www.jusoor.co



[@jusoorstudies](https://www.instagram.com/jusoorstudies)