

## Wu Wei (Do Nothing): China and the Syrian crisis

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“China and the Syrian crisis” could appear as a relatively narrow research topic. However, it has profound ramifications for China’s foreign policy, particularly in terms of relations between China and the Middle East, but also in terms of Chinese perceptions of Asia and the Middle East. Not only is China’s policy towards these two regions connected, hence not exclusive, but it relies more on continuity than change.

China’s management of the Syrian crisis could be best summarized by the Chinese proverb “do nothing and yet do everything» (道常无为而无不为), meaning China is trying to do as little as possible but yet trying to gain as much as possible. Another key concept to describe China’s behavior is «active passivity», also expressed by the proverb “distant water cannot put out a nearby fire” (远水救不了近火).

Pr. Shichor’s main argument made during his presentation is that China’s Syria policy is not about Syria, but about the Middle East and key diplomatic principles.

### “China’s Syrian policy has nothing to do with Syria”

Yitzhak Shichor insists that Syria has been of marginal significance for China and continues to be. Reminding that diplomatic relations with the People Republic of China were established in 1956 - Syria was the second country in the region to do so after Egypt - Syria has either persecuted communists on its territory in the late 1950s, or been deeply influenced by the Soviet Union in the mid-1960. For decades, China has had de facto no room in the country making relations, both military and economic, minimal. Syria has appeared on the Chinese radar since the mid 1990’s as part of China’s will to diversify its oil suppliers at all costs, even though Chinese energy investments in the country remain limited.

As for the Syrian involvement in Lebanon since 1976 which has triggered international reactions, China has refused to take position. When the issue was raised by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) via resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1680 (2006) on the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon,

China and Russia abstained. The Chinese ambassador to the UN has since repeatedly emphasized the concept of non-interference in internal affairs as the key Chinese diplomatic concept as regard to Syria, a concept deriving from its historic fear to undergo UN interference, meaning specifically an American (and Soviet at the time) interference in China's internal affairs.



### China's four stages crisis management

Professor Shichor presents four stages in China's management of any international crisis, ranked according to their preference, the failure of any step forcing China to move to the next step. This typology, first and foremost conditioned by the fear of an intervention, applies to the Syrian crisis.

**Stage 1: Local Level.** China considers that any conflict should be settled peacefully by the parties directly concerned in using diplomatic means. China warns that it refuses to use humanitarian assistance as a pretext to justify an intervention.

In the Syrian case, China has presented a Four-Point Proposal in 2012. This has been interpreted by some scholars as a sign of a growing Chinese will to intervene in international/regional affairs. However, Pr. Shichor disagrees with this since, in his view, China does not intend to intervene and continues to avoid taking side politically in the Middle East. China's Proposal would only be part of a broader communication and public relations strategy, not dissimilar to the one used in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in which China presents itself as a responsible and involved stakeholder, but does nothing concrete to solve the issue.

**Stage 2: Regional Level.** If stage 1 fails, regional organizations (African Union, Arab League, etc.), and / or professional organizations (IAEA) should intervene.

Facing the failure of the parties to settle their conflict – let alone peacefully - China has welcomed regional actors' attempts to intervene, mainly the Red Cross/ Red Crescent and the Arab League, including the involvement of former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to mediate.

**Stage 3 : UN level.** If stage 2 fails, Beijing prefers that the UN Security Council (UNSC) intervenes, even if over 40 years after its admission in this body, it remains very suspicious of its interventions.

All UNSC members – including Morocco backed by the Arab League - supported UNSC Syria-related resolutions without any abstention, with the exception of China and Russia. China's use of its veto power against a resolution that could have facilitated the use of force against the Assad regime can be explained by three factors. First, China rejected the rhetoric used (continued widespread and gross violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, arbitrary executions,

killing and persecution of protestors and members of the media, arbitrary detention) because it could legitimize UN interference in its own internal affairs and UN critics. Second, China was in favor of a longer-term mediation by regional actors. Third, China also avoided repeating the "Libyan deception". In 2011, allegedly, China (and Russia) did not use their veto power after having been assured that the 'no flight zone' decision had been intended to prevent Gadhafi from using its Air Force against civilians, and not to provoke a regime change.

China's triple veto in the Syrian crisis is however an exception since China is the P5 member to have used its veto power the least, less than ten times since 1971. Moreover, China has historically suffered from sanctions and remains opposed to international sanctions, with the rare exceptions such as in the case of Iran or North Korea.

**Stage 4: Unilateral Level.** If stage 3 fails, then a unilateral act is undertaken which China basically rejects but occasionally accepts.

The recent Russian intervention in Syria, however, increases Chinese concerns of such a unilateral scenario. While China was almost exclusively concerned by an American unilateral intervention on the Iraqi model, it must now consider the possibility of a Russian unilateral intervention.



### Impact on China's bilateral relations

#### China-Russia

Apparently, Beijing and Moscow are coordinating. But Beijing is second fiddle to Moscow and may have not been consulted before Russia's intervention to Syria. China has become a stooge which input is not taken into consideration and continues to play a marginal role in the Middle East. Western and Middle Eastern countries tend to overlook China and appeal directly to Russia as the more powerful facto affecting the region, keeping China in an outsider position. It seems all the more paradoxical since while Mao China had the will to interfere but not the capacities to do so, post-Mao China has growing capacities but no will to intervene. As a consequence, China's strategy of not taking side is expected to continue in the near future.



Cartoons published in the Arab press

Professor Shichor forecasts a potential conflict in the mid-term, not between China and the United States, but between Russia and China. Despite little documentary evidence, Sino-Russian relations hide mutual suspicions. Historical reasons (political disagreements, cross-border and territorial problems), growing competition in Central Asia, a widening economic gap, Russian difficulties to maintain its control over its Far East, but also Russia new unilateralism contribute to increasing the likeliness of a bilateral conflict in the horizon. China's dependence in terms of armament supply is only temporary and would not be enough to prevent a conflict in a ten/twenty year horizon.

#### *China-United States*

China still faces a dilemma regarding US presence in the Middle-East. While it sees the US as a stabilizing factor (both countries voted the same way 84% of UN resolutions on the Middle East since 1971), China is still opposed to any US unilateral intervention in the region. Despite the shale gas revolution, Washington will remain energy-dependent vis-a-vis the Middle East and will not shy away from the region.

#### *China-Arab countries*

China's reluctance to interfere and attempts to obstruct others in using its veto power have generated disappointment and misgivings about its role in the Middle East and undermined its diplomatic credit in the region. However, Middle East countries have a short memory and could forget/forgive China's position sooner than expected.

If China is criticized in numerous cartoons published in the region, China's image has been damaged far less than Russia's and the country has been presented as a passive supporter more than an active one (see below).

#### *China-Turkey*

China has been criticized in the Turkish press but also by then PM Erdogan for its support to the Assad regime. Erdogan's role is paradoxical. As mayor of Istanbul, he was clearly pro-Uighur but since its election he has softened his rhetoric in order not to spoil relations with China. He embodies Turkey's ambiguity with China, sympathizing with the Uighur movement but being pragmatic, aware of the massive trade deficit between the two countries (Turkey importing \$25 billion worth of goods while exporting only \$3 billion to China), and the need to strengthen cooperation.

minimum input but got maximum output, which means it has adopted a passive behavior but has gained active outcomes.

First, Syria has been utilized by China to make political statements. Second, if China prefers stability, instability can sometimes be useful. This was the case in Sudan in the 1990s when Western oil companies left the country and created a void that China filled. Third, Beijing's focus remains on East Asia and not West Asia. Fourth, and most importantly, the Middle East has become a laboratory of modern warfare. While China did not participate in any conflict since 1979, and therefore did not acquire any military operational experience in almost 40 years, China can watch what is happening in the region and analyze the use of American, European and Russian's most sophisticated weapons and strategies. Concerning Russia, it is its first demonstration of military force since Afghanistan, and analyzing it could prove to be particularly useful in case of a China-Russia armed conflict.



#### **Q&A**

Pr. Shichor has insisted on Iran's lack of confidence in China because it knows that for Beijing, its relations with Washington are more important than its relations with Teheran. A milestone in the bilateral relationship was the use by the Hezbollah of a Chinese-designed Iranian missile to hit an Israeli ship in 2006, which led to bilateral tensions until China promised Israel that it would not happen again.

On Xinjiang, Pr. Shichor thinks that the majority of the Uighur community still adheres to a moderate form of Sunni Islam, tinted with syncretism. However, while China was previously concerned with nationalist separatism, it now focuses on the threat of religious extremism. According to Pr. Shichor, pro-independence movements are no longer a problem and even though China is unable to fully control its western border – traffics of all kinds exist – the country has only deployed its armed police, and not its army.

Chinese repression in the province can be best explained by the fear that without the use of force today, the risks would be greater tomorrow. To this, Middle Eastern countries have not reacted contrary to jihadist websites. China also continues to highlight the central role of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in order to serve its own interests and to identify a convenient target, even though the organization has virtually ceased to exist since the death of its leader in 2003. In contrast, the role of the Turkestan Islamic Party that coordinates many jihadist websites may be officially underestimated.

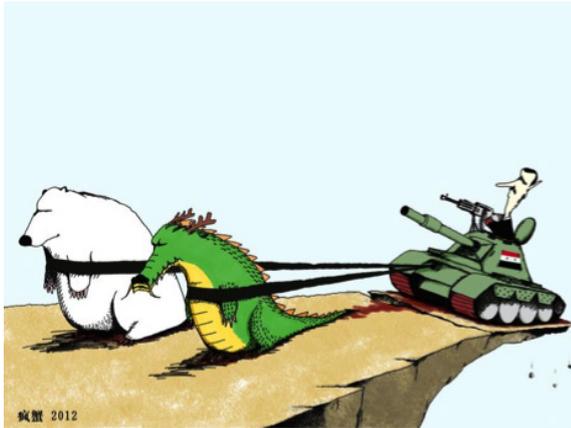
#### **The Syrian crisis as an open laboratory for China**

The Chinese stance on Syria is summarized by Professor Shichor with a Chinese proverb: «sitting on the hill while the tigers fight» (走山观虎斗). China made

On the Bamako hostage-taking in which three Chinese citizens died, China can only play a limited role. However, the country has used these incidents to strengthen its bilateral cooperation (military and security, including

cooperation with Israel to train China's People Armed Police). In terms of intelligence sharing, China may be one of the Top 5 cyber powers, but prospects for cooperation are limited to East Asia, other regions being too far from the country's concerns.

In conclusion, Pr. Shichor repeats his main argument. Syria is not important for China, it is important indirectly in what it represents in the region and the impact it can have on China's relations with its Middle East partners. China is also unlikely to participate in an international coalition against the Islamic State.



*Cartoons published in the Arab press*

