

## China on Russia's intervention in Syria

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China has reacted positively to Russia's military intervention in Syria. The Chinese government perceives it as an element of the global fight against terrorism, and has emphasised the fact that Russia was acting in response to a request by the Syrian government. At the same time, Beijing has argued that the Syrian conflict cannot be resolved by military means and that a political compromise is necessary.

Reports and comments in the Chinese media have been dominated by several major issues. The Russian operation was presented as a strategic failure of the West, and a fiasco of the unilateral policy pursued by the US. Numerous Chinese observers have considered Russia's intervention an adequate response to what they saw as a policy of 'double standards' pursued by the West. In their view, under this policy the Western states themselves contributed to the emergence of so-called Islamic State. Chinese media have emphasised the fact that Russia has benefited from the operation in Syria in many ways: it has defended its interests in the Middle East, boosted its prestige in the international arena and overcome its partial isolation in relations with the West, which has been ongoing since the war with Ukraine began. At the same time, Chinese commentators disagree as to their assessment of the impact of the Russian intervention on relations between Russia and the West. Some of them view the prospect of Russia's rapprochement with the West as likely, whereas others point to the risk that the tensions could be aggravated.

Beijing's position on Russia's intervention is motivated by China's global and regional interests. In a situation of increased tension in Chinese-American relations, Russia has shouldered the burden of open rivalry with the United States. In the context of China's interests in the Middle East, Russia's intervention makes it possible for Beijing to place itself in the position of the only neutral actor in the Syrian conflict, as well as being a possible intermediary. For Beijing, another motive to assess the Russian intervention positively has been the Chinese vision of the global fight against terrorism. China has promoted the need for unity over this issue, by which it intends to legitimise the policy it has pursued in Xinjiang.

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### Positive official reactions

There have been few official responses by Chinese authorities to Russia's intervention in Syria. Reactions have mainly been expressed by China's foreign ministry officials. The Chinese media, for their part, have tended to merely offer neutral agency-style information, and to a large

extent to base their reports on Russian sources. As a consequence, there have been very few commentaries and analyses, in particular such as would directly discuss the possible consequences of the Russian intervention in Syria for China and China's interests.

Since the beginning of the Russian intervention in Syria, China's leaders have emphasised its le-

gitimacy and the fact that Moscow launched its military action in answer to a request from Syria's government. Russia's intervention has been considered an element of the war against terrorism, and the military action has been portrayed as fighting terrorist and extremist forces in Syria<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, the fact that Russia's action is in line with the UN Security Council's resolution to combat Islamic State has been emphasised. At the same time, China's leaders stressed that it is necessary to resolve the Syrian issue through political means in a process that brings all parties to the conflict together<sup>2</sup>. In practice, this stance converges with that of Moscow, and is tantamount to supporting the inclusion of Bashar al-Assad into the peace process.

**Chinese authorities consider Russia's intervention in Syria to be an element of the global fight against terrorism, and have emphasised the legitimacy of Moscow's actions.**

The commentary offered by China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson after Turkey downed a Russian Su-24 warplane can be viewed as the strongest official expression of support for Russia and its role in the Syrian conflict. The spokesperson said that the Russian bomber was shot down when performing a counter-terrorism mission in Syria, and referred to this incident as "a loss to the international campaign against terrorism"<sup>3</sup>.

In their comments regarding the Russian intervention, Chinese leaders have emphasised the need for coordination and cooperation under the umbrella of the counter-terrorism coalition. They also criticised the double standards applied by Western countries. This stance should be interpreted as an appeal to consider Russia's intervention as an element of the global fight against terrorism. China has also expressed its support for Moscow's proposal for one front to be opened in the war against terrorism under the aegis of the United Nations<sup>4</sup>.

### 'A blow to the West'...

Chinese commentators have interpreted Russia's intervention in Syria mainly as proof of the strategic failure of the West, in particular the United States. According to them, this failure is evident at both global and regional levels. They see it as a failure of American unilateralism, and at the same time as direct proof of the emergence of a multipolar international order<sup>5</sup>. Similarly, in their view, Russia's intervention can be considered an attempt by Moscow to return to the international stage. This attempt has raised concern on the part of the US, as it poses a threat to America's status of global leader. The strategy the US has pursued in the region over the last four years has collapsed, and America's position and prestige have been on the wane in the eyes of its allies<sup>6</sup>. In the opinion of Chinese commentators, the development of the situation in Syria suggests that America is no longer

<sup>1</sup> Conference by China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, 8 October 2015, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1304300.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1304300.shtml); conference by China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, 4 December 2015, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1321411.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1321411.shtml)

<sup>2</sup> Conference by China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, 8 October 2015, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1304300.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1304300.shtml)

<sup>3</sup> Conference by China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, 22 December 2015, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1326963.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1326963.shtml)

<sup>4</sup> Conference by China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, 4 December 2015, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1321411.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1321411.shtml)

<sup>5</sup> *Wenhui Bao* (a daily published in Shanghai by the local unit of the Communist Party of China), 'Russia is getting increasingly stronger, the US is getting weaker. A change in the structure of power in the Middle East', 16 October 2015, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/16/c\\_128324140.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/16/c_128324140.htm)

<sup>6</sup> *Renmin Ribao* (an official daily published by the Communist Party of China), 'Russia's military operation is a challenge to America's leadership', 3 October 2014, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/03/c\\_128287838.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/03/c_128287838.htm)

the biggest member of the family<sup>7</sup>. Some authors claim that Washington fears stabilisation of the situation in Syria, and this is why it has been critical of Russian intervention there<sup>8</sup>. To the US and the West, the Russian intervention came as a surprise, which is why they began to criticise it, referring to the intervention as a major mistake<sup>9</sup>.

At the same time, Chinese observers claim that Russia's counter-terrorism campaign is the right answer to the double standards applied by Western states in their policy towards terrorism.

### Chinese commentators interpret Russia's intervention in Syria mainly as proof of the strategic failure of the West, in particular the US.

In the opinion of Chinese commentators, the present situation is the product of the proxy war triggered in Syria by the West, mostly for its own convenience. At present, the West needs to face the consequences of the conflict, which include the growing wave of migration and the fight against Islamic State<sup>10</sup>. Most authors are of the opinion that the West is co-responsible for the emergence of Islamic State and for the increased significance of extremist forces in the

Middle East<sup>11</sup>. They argue that Western states support extremist groups, whereas Russia does not differentiate the warring groups in Syria and does not refer to them as "good terrorists or bad terrorists"<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, unlike Russia's actions, the US-led strikes against Islamic State have not been legitimised by the UN Security Council<sup>13</sup>.

### ...and a series of benefits for Russia

Most Chinese commentators point to the benefits Russia has drawn from getting militarily involved in the Syrian conflict. They agree that Russia's military action in Syria has been considerably more successful than that of the Western states<sup>14</sup>. So far, the US has not achieved much, and the EU would welcome changes in the Middle East, in the light of the refugee crisis<sup>15</sup>. Russia, for its part, has strengthened Bashar al-Assad. At the same time, it has managed to suppress Islamic State, forcing it to retreat<sup>16</sup>. According to Chinese experts, by supporting Assad Russia has defended its strategic inter-

<sup>7</sup> *Science Daily* (a science-oriented weekly published by the government), 'Russia's success in the fight against terrorism in Syria makes the West jealous', 20 October 2015; [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/20/c\\_128337814.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/20/c_128337814.htm)

<sup>8</sup> *Renmin Ribao*, 'The US finds it difficult to accept its failure, hence the media smear campaign against Russia', 3 October 2015 <http://military.people.com.cn/n/2015/10/07/c1011-27668134.html>; *Wenhui Bao*, 'Russia is getting stronger, the US is getting weaker', *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> *Liaowang* (a weekly devoted to international affairs published by the government-controlled Xinhua news agency), 'In what direction is the Syrian conflict evolving?', 20 October 2015, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/20/c\\_128332124.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/20/c_128332124.htm)

<sup>10</sup> Xinhua (main Chinese news agency), 'To give Syria hope for peace', 1 November 2015, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-11/01/c\\_128380287.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-11/01/c_128380287.htm)

<sup>11</sup> *China Daily* (an English-language daily published by the Communist Party of China), 'Sensible strategic move by Russia to give Assad support', 14 October 2015, <http://en.people.cn/n/2015/1014/c90000-8961578.html>; *Renmin Ribao*, 'Will Russia's strike improve the situation in Syria?', 10 October 2015, <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2015/1010/c1002-27681501.html>

<sup>12</sup> *Wenhui Bao*, 'How Russia avoids problems in Syria', 5 October 2015, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/05/c\\_128290436.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/05/c_128290436.htm)

<sup>13</sup> *Wenhui Bao*, 'The intervention in Syria will aggravate rivalry between Russia and the West', 2 October 2015 [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/05/c\\_128290436.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/05/c_128290436.htm)

<sup>14</sup> *China Youth Daily* (a daily published by the Communist Youth League of China, approved by the government), 'Why Russia wouldn't dispatch ground troops in its war against terrorism', 27 November 2015, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-11/27/c\\_128474283.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-11/27/c_128474283.htm)

<sup>15</sup> Xinhua, 'Russia's intentions in Syria', 1 October 2015, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/01/c\\_1116730372.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/01/c_1116730372.htm)

<sup>16</sup> *Liberation Daily* (an official daily published by the Shanghai unit of the Communist Party of China), 'Russia's 'three chess moves' in the fight against Islamic State', 13 October 2015, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/13/c\\_128311291.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/13/c_128311291.htm); Xinhua, 'Where is the situation in Syria heading?', 11 October 2015, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/11/c\\_128305567.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/11/c_128305567.htm)

ests, including its political and military presence in the Middle East. It has been suggested that Syria is Russia's last ally in the region; moreover, it hosts the only Russian military base outside the post-Soviet area<sup>17</sup>. Other analysts claim that Moscow's action has been a defensive reaction to pressure exerted by Western states intending to push Russia out of the Middle East. However, there is agreement as to the fact that Russia has considerably strengthened its position in the Middle East as a result of its intervention in Syria. According to Chinese observers, Russia is returning to the Middle East, having been pushed out of the region by the US after 2003<sup>18</sup>. Vladimir Putin's initiatives have boosted support for Russia in the Middle East, as evidenced by pro-Russian demonstrations organised in Syria and Iraq<sup>19</sup>.

Furthermore, Chinese commentators emphasise that Islamic State poses a direct threat to Russia. In their view, Russia's intervention can also be seen as a response to domestic challenges; Islamic State has recruited numerous Muslims from the Caucasus and Central Asia<sup>20</sup>. Putin intends to punish Islamic State and use this as an example in order to intimidate terrorist organisations operating in Russia<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> Xinhua, 'Putin on 'two fronts' – what is the chance he succeeds?', [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/14/c\\_128313948.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/14/c_128313948.htm); China Radio International (CRI), 'The Chinese-American game in Syria – a successful game of chess for Putin', 14 October 2015, <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2015/1014/c157278-27698054.html>

<sup>18</sup> *Global Times* (a daily devoted to international affairs published by *Renmin Ribao*, a government-controlled newspaper), 'Moscow looks for renewed role in Middle East politics', 14 October 2015, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/946994.shtml>; CRI: 'The Chinese-American game in Syria – a successful game of chess for Putin', *op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> Xinhua, 'Russia's intentions in Syria', *op. cit.*; *Wenhui Bao*, 'Russia is getting stronger, the US is getting weaker. A change in the structure of power in the Middle East', *op. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> *Renmin Ribao*, 'Will Russia's strike improve the situation in Syria?', *op. cit.*

<sup>21</sup> CRI, 'The Chinese-American game in Syria – a successful game of chess for Putin', 14 October 2015, <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2015/1014/c157278-27698054.html>

Chinese commentators also point to the fact that the campaign in Syria has helped boost Russia's prestige on the international stage.

### **The Russian intervention has at least partly diverted Washington's attention from the tensions in Chinese-American relations which have been rising for over a year.**

Despite the deep crisis it has been facing recently, Russia has demonstrated its potential for action<sup>22</sup>. In China's opinion, the success of the Russian intervention 'haunts' the US and Europe. Not only does this success confirm the ineffectiveness of the West's actions so far, but it also makes Russia the leader of the war against terrorism. According to Chinese authors, the US and Europe have their hands tied, which is why they are now expressing their envy and anger in multiple ways. They accuse Russia of performing strikes against the moderate opposition in Syria and of fabricating information regarding the intervention<sup>23</sup>. According to these authors, it is evident that Russia has achieved 'moral supremacy' in the global war against terrorism, thereby winning international acclaim.

At the same time, Chinese commentators admit that the Russian intervention is not on its own enough to resolve the conflict, and that a political solution will be necessary<sup>24</sup>. They argue that the intervention is unlikely to stop the Syrian civil war, because none of the parties is able to resolve the crisis on its own, and will have to appeal to the international community for its assistance.

<sup>22</sup> *Global Times*, 'Moscow looks for renewed role in Middle East politics', *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> *Wenhui Bao*, 'The reaction by the US and the UK to Russia's intervention – admiration, envy and anger', 12 October 2015, <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2015/1012/c1002-27686025.html>

<sup>24</sup> *Liberation Daily*, 'Resolution of the conflict in Syria requires joint action by all sides', 29 October 2015, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/29/c\\_128370155.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/29/c_128370155.htm)

## Disputes over the assessment of relations between Russia and the West

Chinese commentators continue to disagree over the possible consequences of the Russian intervention for relations between Russia and the West. Some commentators argue that Russia has created conditions for improving its relations with the West. For Russia, the intervention in Syria may be a chance to overcome diplomatic isolation, to resume relations with the West, and to regain the 'position of moral supremacy' which Russia lost after the annexation of Crimea and the conflict over Ukraine<sup>25</sup>.

**Russia's involvement in Syria makes it possible for Beijing to present itself as the only neutral party and a potential intermediary.**

The joint fight with Islamic State opens the way to Russia's cooperation with the West in other areas as well. Russia adopted an active and responsible stance when it decided to fight ISIS and solicit a diplomatic resolution of the conflict. The US is becoming increasingly prone to compromise. Moreover, it has been suggested that the US has been gradually weakening its stance regarding the necessity to oust Assad. This means that the balance has been progressively swinging in Russia's favour<sup>26</sup>.

On the other hand, Chinese authors warn against the risk of increased tension, in particular in the context of the military operations be-

ing carried out by Russia and the West. Russia's intervention has also been interpreted as a Russian-American contest<sup>27</sup>. Due to differences of opinions between Russia and the West over the role Assad could play in the fight with Islamic State and in stopping the war in Syria, some authors claim that the Russian intervention is likely to step up rivalry between the two sides<sup>28</sup>.

## Benefits to China from the Russian intervention

The fact that Beijing has adopted a positive stance towards Russia's intervention should be interpreted in two ways: in the context of the benefits that China may draw on a global scale, and in the context of China's limited interests in Syria and the territory controlled by so-called Islamic State.

Russia has shouldered the burden of acting as the main geopolitical rival of the United States. At the same time, it has set precedents that China may use in the future. By getting militarily involved in Syria, Moscow is contributing to a major disruption of the policy the US has pursued in the Middle East, and to the process of weakening the US's global position. The Russian intervention has at least partly diverted Washington's attention from the tensions in Chinese-American relations which have been rising for over a year. Moreover, in the context of Russian interventionism (Ukraine, Syria), China has now an opportunity to present itself as a moderate and reliable partner.

From the perspective of China's Middle Eastern policy, Russia's intervention makes it possible for Beijing to present itself as the only neutral party. An increasing number of actors have become involved in the conflict in Syria, for whom it has become a proxy war. China, on the other

<sup>25</sup> Xinhua, 'Putin on 'two fronts'', *op. cit.*; *Renmin Ribao*, 'Will Russia's strike improve the situation in Syria?', *op. cit.*; Xinhua: 'Russia's intentions in Syria', *op. cit.*

<sup>26</sup> *Liberation Daily*, 'A compromise by global powers: a chance for a peaceful resolution of the Syrian problem', 25 December 2015, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-12/25/c\\_128565478.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-12/25/c_128565478.htm); Xinhua, 'The resolution on Syria does not resolve the problem of Assad's future. Russia's stance considered the most important', 20 December 2015, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-12/20/c\\_128548423.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-12/20/c_128548423.htm)

<sup>27</sup> *China Daily*, 'Sensible strategic move by Russia to give Assad support', *op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> *Wenhui Bao*, 'The intervention in Syria will aggravate rivalry between Russia and the West', *op. cit.*; Xinhua, 'Where is the situation in Syria heading?', *op. cit.*

hand, unlike the United States, does not intend to oust Assad, nor does it mean to weaken Iran (unlike Saudi Arabia) and is not particularly interested in establishing military bases in the area (unlike Russia). China has formulated a proposal to convene a Geneva-III peace conference<sup>29</sup>, and has invited representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition to pay a visit to Beijing. China has referred to the manner in which the crisis over Iran's nuclear ambitions has been resolved as a model for resolving the Syrian conflict. In the case of Iran, all the global powers agreed to act in concert<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> *China Daily*, 'Sensible strategic move by Russia to give Assad support', *op. cit.*

<sup>30</sup> *Liberation Daily*, 'Resolution of the conflict in Syria requires joint action by all sides', *op. cit.*

By offering its support for the Russian intervention, China has emphasised the international dimension of the global fight against terrorism, and has tried to make its tough policy towards Xinjiang an element of this fight. China has attempted to highlight the similarities between the Uyghur separatist groups and Islamic State which Russia intends to fight. This is meant to boost the legitimacy of its crackdown on the residents of Xinjiang province, and at the same time to expose the policy of double standards pursued by the West, which sees the Chinese government's police operations in Xinjiang as the persecution of a minority group.

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