

BRIEFLY SPOTLIGHT

Chinese coverage of Syria

Between 27 and 28 November, as the first reports of a surprise rebel offensive in northern Syria began to break, China's ambassador to Syria, Shi Hongwei, met with two new Syrian government ministers: Faye Meedad - the Minister of Agriculture - and Ahmed Damiria - the Minister of Health.^{1,2} There was no overt mention of the ongoing conflict, with official read-outs instead focussing on the "deep friendship" between Syria and China, bilateral cooperation on agricultural development, and Chinese pledges to continue to support public health in Syria through the provision of medical aid and personnel training.^{3,4} Likewise, in an interview published on 2 December, Mohammed Hassanein Khaddam, the Syrian ambassador to China, was quoted during an Arab states' diplomatic delegation's visit to Fujian Province. He highlighted China's pivotal role in the region, particularly in technology and renewable energy, and expressed interest in enhancing cooperation with Chinese firms for economic development.⁵

On 2 December, in response to a direct question at a regular press conference, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lin Jian expressed China's "deep concern" regarding the situation in northwestern Syria, reaffirming China's commitment to supporting Syrian efforts for national security and stability.^{6,7,8} He added, "as a country that enjoys friendly relations with Syria, China is ready to make efforts to prevent further deterioration of the situation".⁹

Then the tone began to change. On 5 December, the Chinese embassy in Syria issued an advisory statement, urging Chinese nationals to leave the country "as soon as possible" due to a deteriorating security situation amid escalating rebel offensives, particularly in Aleppo and Hama.^{10,11} The embassy highlighted that those remaining in affected areas may face "extremely high-security risks" with limited assistance available.^{12,13} Meanwhile, Chinese state broadcaster CCTV's flagship news programme Xinwen Lianbo continued to cover the latest developments in Syria, featuring claims and wording from the Syrian government.¹⁴

As the downfall of President Assad was confirmed, China's Foreign Ministry repeatedly expressed hope for the restoration of stability, indicating a desire for a "Syrian-led and Syrian-owned" political process, but the government's messaging also shifted markedly.^{15,16,17,18} On 9 December, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning was questioned at least six times about Beijing's stance on the aftermath during a regular press conference. When asked directly, she declined to comment directly on the ousted president, and actively re-framed China's "friendly relations" with Syria under the Assad regime as being "for all Syrian people".^{19,20} Similarly, when pressed for a comment on Israeli actions in the Golan Heights, Mao deflected: "China is closely monitoring the developments in Syria, and Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity should be respected".²¹ There was also a reported shift in broader reporting; both official statements and state media reports switched from using the term "terrorist forces", as used by Assad's government to describe rebels, to the more neutral "anti-government forces" when referring to Hayat Tahir al-Sham (HTS). Moreover, in a diversion from previous responses, the ministry did not mention China's willingness to help mediate in Syria.²²

On 13 December Foreign Minister Wang Yi addressed the situation in Syria and the wider Middle East at a joint press conference with his Egyptian counterpart in Beijing.²³ He described China as "highly concerned" about the situation in Syria, and called for the implementation of the Security Council Resolution 2254. This had been adopted in 2015 as a roadmap for the peace process in the country, and stated that "the Syrian people will decide the future of Syria".^{24,25} Echoing this principle, Wang Yi stated that China supports the promotion of a "domestic political process in accordance with the principle of 'Syrian-led and Syrian-owned'", calling on the international community to "earnestly safeguard" Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity, "respect Syria's national and religious traditions; and let the Syrian people make decisions independently".^{26,27,28}

Adarga Analysis: The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria has significant implications for China, which had previously maintained friendly ties with the Assad family. In recent years, the bilateral relationship between the two countries has been characterised by diplomatic and investment links. It is likely that the Assad regime was viewed as a key partner for Beijing in the Middle East due to Syria's geographic significance, and as a valuable strategic connection point for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).^{29,30,31,32}

In September 2023, President Bashar al-Assad visited China for the first time in nearly two decades as part of his efforts to reintegrate Syria into the international community, following his country's readmission to the Arab League earlier in May of the same year.³³ During his visit, Assad met with Chinese President Xi Jinping and other high-ranking officials, and the two countries announced the establishment of a strategic partnership.³⁴ This partnership signified a milestone in Sino-Syrian relations, highlighting China's support for Syria amid ongoing sanctions and challenges faced by the Assad regime.^{35,36} While China's long-standing interest in Syria includes investments in oil and gas assets, at the time the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed optimism that Assad's visit would deepen cooperation between the two countries with a focus on reconstruction efforts within healthcare and renewable energy initiatives.^{37,38,39,40}

China must now navigate the risks posed by the rapidly changing domestic political landscape. Regime change in Syria raises questions over China's economic interests and investments in the country, and Beijing must now confront the uncertainty of a new government which may not align with China's interests.^{41,42} Middle East focussed Chinese academics have already begun to speculate on this point. For example, Professor Fan Hongda of Shanghai Foreign Studies University's Institute of Middle Eastern Studies predicted that the new Syrian government led by rebel forces are likely to not be 'as friendly' towards China, complicating China's strategic ambitions in the region and potentially undermining its existing investments and influence.⁴³

Adding another layer of complexity is China's concern regarding the impact of the Syrian civil war on its own national security, namely due to the presence of Uyghur fighters among rebel forces in Syria, namely from the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), a militant Uyghur jihadist group.^{44,45} While estimates of Uyghur fighter numbers vary from the hundreds to the thousands, the rebel offensive has reportedly emboldened TIP's activities in northwestern Syria, alarming Chinese security officials.⁴⁶ TIP's resurgence is likely viewed by Beijing as a direct threat to Xinjiang's stability. TIP's fighters may gain experience and influence within regional jihadist networks. This security concern has been mirrored across online discourse, with Chinese bloggers expressing alarm over TIP's involvement in the Syrian conflict and describing the organisation as China's "mortal enemy".⁴⁷ Although China is highly likely to continue its narrative of non-interference publicly, it is likely China will seek to apply pressure on Syria's new rulers to exclude these fighters from any role in government and potentially even to seek their deportation to China. However, this strategy is likely to prove challenging given the Uyghur militants' working relationship with HTS, the dominant rebel faction in the region. While it is unlikely the Uyghur militants will play a significant role in the future Syrian government, there is a remote chance HTS would comply with any People's Republic of China (PRC) requests to deport aligned fighters to China.

China's investments in Syria had already been cautious, largely due to the ongoing civil war which had degraded the country's infrastructure and limited the viability of any large-scale investments.⁴⁸ Despite these challenges, however, numerous business ventures were promised, reflecting a strategic interest in establishing influence through economic means rather than military intervention, as China's military presence in the Middle East remains minimal.^{49,50} Looking forward, China's broader BRI ambitions in the region now face new hurdles. The collapse of Assad's government jeopardises efforts to establish a Mediterranean foothold, which Syria had represented as part of China's westward economic corridor. Furthermore, there is a realistic possibility that a rebel-led government may prioritise Western or Gulf investment partners, thereby diminishing China's economic leverage in the region.⁵¹ Consequently, China may need to prioritise alternative routes through Iran or Turkey, further entangling itself in regional geopolitics and thereby amplifying China's already precarious balancing act in the Middle East.

Therefore, overall, we interpret China's evolving response to the rebel offensive in Syria between late November and mid-December as reflecting a substantial shift from its previous diplomatic alignment with the Assad government to a more neutral and cautious position. As conditions deteriorated and the political landscape shifted, it is highly likely Beijing recalibrated its messaging to balance pragmatism and long-term strategic interests. This shift is evidenced throughout the Chinese coverage, both from official channels and more broadly across the PRC's information ecosystem.

While initial meetings reinforced China's priorities – preserving its economic foothold and projecting stability in its bilateral relationship despite the worsening situation - in early December China's messaging clearly shifted as the rebel advances intensified and Assad's future looked less certain. In particular, the Chinese Embassy's 5 December advisory for nationals to leave Syria likely signalled a turning point through Beijing's recognition of the conflict's severity and its prioritisation of citizen safety over maintaining appearances of stability.

It is highly likely China is now seeking to reframe its relationship with Syria to one that serves "all Syrian people" in an attempt to distance itself from the Assad regime while preserving flexibility with the new government. This cautious approach was exemplified by Wang Yi's call for a "Syrian-led and Syrian-owned" political process. Through his appeal to UN Security Council Resolution 2254, it also aligned with Beijing's broader foreign policy principles of sovereignty and non-interference, positioning China as a neutral stakeholder in Syria's reconstruction, and presenting itself as a responsible global actor. This careful balancing act seeks to maintain its influence in the region and project the PRC as a stabilising force amid ongoing turmoil.

However, the success of this recalibration remains uncertain. The evolving crisis highlights the fragile nature of China's foreign policy towards the Middle East, and its dependence on stable partnerships to advance its Belt and Road Initiative ambitions.^{52,53} Consequently, whether Beijing can adapt effectively to Syria's shifting landscape remains an open question.

ABOUT

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