



## OSCE – A New Transatlantic Approach to Engage China on Syria?

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May 2016

### Abstract

With Germany's chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 2016 and the ongoing Syrian crisis, Berlin wants to use this platform to engage China through its outreach program. Previously these formats normally focus on economic issues. However, in the aftermath of the Paris and Brussels terrorist attacks and China's appointment of a new envoy in April for the Syrian crisis, Beijing's foray into the Mideast could provide an opportunity for the EU and the US to engage China via OSCE on global security.

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### About the Author of this Issue

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Christina Lin



## Analysis

With Germany's chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 2016, OSCE is back in business after a 15-year slumber.

The Ukraine crisis highlighted OSCE's unique role in conflict management between Russia and the West, and now Berlin wants to use this platform to engage China through its outreach<sup>1</sup> program.

In the past these formats normally focus on economic issues, and the Federal Foreign Office invited China to attend the OSCE business conference in Berlin on 18-19 May<sup>2</sup> to promote connectivity in China's Silk Road Initiatives – also known as One Belt, One Road (OBOR).

But in the aftermath of the Paris and Brussels terrorist attacks and China's appointment of a new envoy<sup>3</sup> in April for the Syrian crisis, Beijing's foray into the Mideast provides an opportunity for the EU and the US to engage China on security issues.

### Terrorist haven in Syria and China's evolving non-intervention policy

Currently, the biggest challenge facing China's OBOR is the volatile Mideast segment. The Arab Spring and rise of Islamist forces in the region is putting pressure on China's traditional non-interference stance.

In 2011, China was shocked by its \$20 billion Libyan losses over night and had to evacuate 36,000 Chinese nationals, highlighting a new security threat to its citizens overseas. China has an estimated five million workers abroad with two million in Africa and the Mideast, and in 2014 Chinese tourists overseas reached 109 million.<sup>4</sup>

The Paris and Brussels attacks, and the murder of a kidnapped Chinese citizen by ISIS, also highlight the risk of all countries with fighters waging Syrian jihad and returning home to roost. According to IHS Jane's counter terrorism expert Anthony Davis, China has over 1,000<sup>5</sup> fighters from Western China in ISIS and the al-Qaeda affiliate Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP). If the fighters try to return and face difficulty to gain access in China, security analyst Jacob Zenn<sup>6</sup> from Jamestown Foundation assessed "the TIP will move to attacking Chinese abroad."<sup>7</sup>

This has alarmed Beijing especially after the August 2015 Bangkok Erawan Shrine bombing that killed Chinese tourists, and the February 2016 *Reuters*<sup>8</sup> reported that the suspects from Turkey also planted a bomb at a pier packed with hundreds of Chinese tourists as their primary target.

In the face of additional threats to Chinese citizens overseas – the November killing of Chinese citizens by al-Qaeda in Mali,<sup>9</sup> ISIS execution of the Chinese national, the Bangkok bombing, and evacuation of Chinese citizens from Libya and Yemen – Beijing is adopting a more proactive diplomatic and military posture in the Mideast.

<sup>1</sup> <http://thediplomat.com/2016/01/chinas-new-era-of-diplomacy-engaging-in-syria/>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/EN/Aussenpolitik/Laender/Aktuelle\\_Artikel/China/160202\\_Seidenstra%C3%9Fe\\_Initiative.html](http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/EN/Aussenpolitik/Laender/Aktuelle_Artikel/China/160202_Seidenstra%C3%9Fe_Initiative.html)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1933103/chinas-appointment-syria-envoy-boost-involvement-middle>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.chinainternetwatch.com/13292/outbound-traveler-2014/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.bangkokpost.com/print/744396/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/09/turkey-china-xinjiang-ughurs-isis-prevent-extremism.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/07/turkey-china-random-violence-become-norm-in-lgbt.html#>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-blast-china-idUSKCN0VY2XP>



Some skeptics point to China's non-interference policy as an obstacle to a more robust security stance. However, this needs to be placed within context. From Beijing's perspective, it is more in reference to intervening in other countries' domestic politics such as western-sponsored democracy-promotion and color revolutions. Non-interference policy does not mean inaction when China's security and interests are threatened.

As a July 2015 International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) conference<sup>10</sup> in Washington, DC, Stimson Center China Fellow Yun Sun further clarified that when it comes to protecting Chinese citizens, non-interference policy does not apply, and China will exhaust all means possible to protect them when they are threatened. Sun explained that as an unelected government, the Communist regime derives its legitimacy by its credibility and capability to protect Chinese citizens from threats at home and abroad. As protection of its citizens is vital for regime survival, and Chinese presence is expanding into ever more unstable regions, China will increasingly be compelled to intervene overseas to protect its expanding interests and expatriate population.

The recent passing of the counter-terrorism law<sup>11</sup> allowing the Chinese military and paramilitary police to operate abroad evidences this. On the home front, China has also increased security forces and since the 2009 Xinjiang uprising, internal state security budget has surpassed defense budget every year.

In 2010, China's security budget was \$87 billion while defense was \$84.6 billion; in 2011 security was \$99 billion while defense was \$95.6 billion; in 2012 security was \$111.4 billion while defense was \$106.4 billion; in 2013 security budget was \$123.6 billion while defense was \$119 billion. In 2014, the Chinese government withheld full disclosure of the security budget due to its sensitive nature, while defense is \$131.57 billion. However, based on past trends it was likely higher than the defense budget. In 2015 the defense budget is \$141 billion, a 10% increase from 2014, while security budget increased by 11%. By comparison Pentagon's budget is four times greater at \$534 billion.

Although the Pentagon continues to focus on China's defense budget, the larger internal security budget suggests Beijing perhaps view internal stability and protection of citizens as a greater priority than potential conflict in the South China Sea, especially given western China is the bridgehead of the Silk Road initiatives and connectivity across Eurasia.

In this light, OSCE's presence across the Eurasia continent that overlaps with China's OBOR, could provide an opportunity for the US and EU can engage China as it begins to emerge as a security actor.

### Engaging China as an emerging security actor

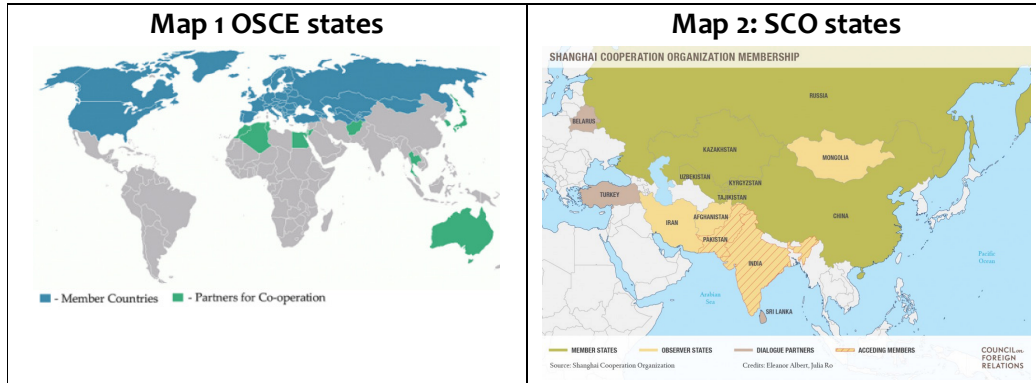
OSCE may be a timely platform for a coordinated transatlantic approach towards China, and with the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Firstly, OSCE and SCO share overlapping membership of Russia and the four Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Geography matters, and this could facilitate Eurasian connectivity via the OBOR initiatives.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-attacks-china-xi-idUSKCN0TA07P20151121>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHHewVlrxoE>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-12-29/china-legalises-overseas-counter-terrorism-operations/7057322>



Secondly, unlike NATO and CSTO that are collective defence alliances, SCO and OSCE are multilateral cooperative security platforms for confidence building and crisis management. Both are focused on non-traditional security issues like counter-terrorism and conflict prevention and resolution, and can also reduce tensions between Russia<sup>12</sup> and the West – given OSCE was initially conceived as a forum to mitigate tensions between NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

Thirdly, as China enters the Mideast security scene, OSCE can engage China on security issues through its partnership program as it has done with Asian partners such as Japan and South Korea and Mediterranean partners in the Levant and North Africa. In the past China had participated in OSCE Mediterranean partners program on an SCO<sup>13</sup> ticket, so there is room for further OSCE-SCO engagement in the Mideast region.

Finally, OSCE could offer a platform to test China’s role as a conflict mediator, following its role in the P5+1 deal with Iran and its present role in the Syrian crisis. Beijing also has a unique role in the current Saudi-Iran tension over Syria, given its “cleaner” scorecard than other permanent members of the UN Security Council. US is seen as being pro-Israel, Russia is perceived to be backing Iran and Shia Muslims with its military operations in Syria, and Europe has colonial baggage in the Mideast region.

In contrast, China enjoys good relations with both Tehran and Riyadh, and its hitherto non-interference policy is now an asset. As such, Beijing has the potential and capability to transform its role as an important security provider and mediator in the Mideast, and OSCE can serve as a platform to debut its new role.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. An earlier version was published by *The Cipher Brief* on April 28, 2016.

<sup>12</sup>[http://www.oijp.ac.at/index.php?id=49&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=20&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=906&cHash=f6633ed6a893f8c4a8c28cd1f7eca8b8](http://www.oijp.ac.at/index.php?id=49&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=20&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=906&cHash=f6633ed6a893f8c4a8c28cd1f7eca8b8)

<sup>13</sup> <https://ifsh.de/file-CORE/documents/yearbook/english/08/Evers-en.pdf>