



China could be the wild card if US conducts regime change in Syria

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Abstract

Leaders in Washington DC do not seem to realize that the United States is not the only country with red lines in Syria. The inability for self-reflection and to stand in others' shoes so as to understand their perspectives is dangerous – and risks misperception, miscalculation, and escalation of limited military conflict into a larger war. By disregarding and violating other states' legitimate security interests, be it Russia or China, President Donald Trump risks opening the Pandora's box of drawing in additional great powers to defend the Syrian government from terrorists and regime change.

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Analysis

In 2012, media outlets in the Middle East reported the possibility of a war game¹ involving Iran, Russia, China and Syria in the Mediterranean. It would be one of the largest war games ever planned, involving 90,000 troops, 400 aircraft, 1,000 tanks and hundreds of rockets.

While the war game did not materialize at that time, it was a signal to the US and other Western nations that the four Eurasian powers were drawing a line in the sand – and that line seemed to be Syria. Washington politicians tend to project their own fears, desires, and lack of understanding on to others, assuming they will react according to the assumptions held in the Beltway. However, the inability for self-reflection and to stand in others' shoes so as to understand their perspectives is dangerous – and risks misperception, miscalculation, and escalation of limited military conflict into a larger war.

What leaders in Washington do not realize is that the United States is not the only country with red lines. By disregarding and violating other states' legitimate security interests, be it Russia or China, President Donald Trump risks opening the Pandora's box of drawing in additional great powers to defend the Syrian government from terrorists and regime change.

China has key interests in Syria

So what's at stake for China in Syria?

As widely reported, Chinese troops² are already on the ground in Syria to fight thousands³ of Uyghur⁴ militants, whether in ISIS or the Chinese al-Qaeda.⁵ Jihadists launched an attack⁶ on the Chinese Embassy in Kyrgyzstan in 2016, and Beijing fears that they plan on further attacking China's territory and its citizens and assets abroad.

If the Syrian government is toppled by US military strikes and the armed opposition consisting of various jihadist groups such as Ahrar al Sham, al Qaeda groups, Saudi-backed Jaysh al Islam (that supplied the chemical attack evidence in Gouta), and Chinese Uyghur al Qaeda are allowed a permanent safe haven in Syria, they will continue to be trained and equipped as a more professional fighting force to attack China and partition Xinjiang, similar to the current partitioning of Syria.

It is well known that China's core interests are sovereignty, territorial integrity, continued economic development and the survival of the Communist Party of China (CPC). The US providing a safe haven in Syria for a Chinese al-Qaeda to attack China, similar to Afghanistan providing a safe haven for al-Qaeda to attack the US on September 11, 2001, may provoke the Chinese dragon to bring its full military force to bear against this threat.

¹ Joanna Paraszczuk, "Iran, Russia, China, Syria plan largest war game", *The Jerusalem Post*, June 19, 2012,

<http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Iran-Russia-China-Syria-plan-largest-war-game>

² Yaron Friedman, "Commando units and rice; the Chinese are coming to Syria", *i24 News*, December 4, 2017,

<https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/161888-171204-commando-units-and-rice-the-chinese-are-coming-to-syria>

³ "Syria: 5,000 Chinese Uyghurs fighting in Syria", *Middle East Monitor*, May 9, 2017,

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170509-syria-5000-chinese-uyghurs-fighting-in-syria/>

⁴ Jenan Moussa, @akhbar, May 16, 2017, <https://twitter.com/jenanmoussa/status/864593687191465984/video/1>

⁵ *The Long War Journal*, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/?s=turkistan+islamic+party+syria>

⁶ Olga Dzyubenko, "Kyrgyzstan says Uighur militants behind attacks on China's embassy", *Reuters*, September 6, 2016,

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kyrgyzstan-blast-china/kyrgyzstan-says-uighur-militant-groups-behind-attack-on-chinas-embassy-idUSKCN11C1DK>



In addition to protecting its territory from attacks, China also needs energy resources from the Middle East and market access. This sustains the continued rising living standards that undergird the CPC's legitimacy and survival. As such, when the US military consistently threatens to arm Uyghur militants to destabilize Xinjiang and muses about mining waters around China's ports to cut off its trade and energy supply, it fuels the CPC's distrust of Washington's intentions for regime change.

For example, in a February 2014 article⁷ in the US Naval Institute's Proceedings magazine titled "Deterring the Dragon," a retired naval commander proposed laying offensive underwater mines along China's coast to close main ports and destroying its maritime lines of communication. He also recommended sending special operations forces to arm China's restive minorities in Xinjiang and Tibet.

In a 2015 War on the Rocks⁸ article titled "The economics of war with China: This will hurt you more than it hurts me," a US Army colonel also recommended an offensive mining campaign⁹ to bring China's economy to a halt. He argued that as seven of the top 10 container ports in the world were Chinese, the country was highly vulnerable to energy and trade blockades.

With the Pentagon's new National Defense Strategy actively planning for war with China and Russia¹⁰ and a barrage of military writings on how to cut off China's energy supply, one wonders how Chinese defense planners are perceiving US intentions. Most important, how will China respond?

A China-Russia Alliance?

The Chinese and Russian militaries seem to be signaling to the US that neither country would stand alone in the event of an attack – whether in East Asia or the Mediterranean. Over the past years, both have conducted joint military exercises in the Mediterranean, Baltic¹¹ and South China seas.

In 2001¹² they also signed a "friendship pact" on mutual assistance, which is not a mutual defense treaty although some have surmised that Article 9 could be interpreted as such. However, with the US naming China, Russia, Iran and North Korea as the new axis of evil in its latest National Security Strategy, inflicting sanctions on Russia and threatening a trade war on China, this could push Beijing and Moscow toward a closer alignment.

As discussed in The National Interest¹³ by US Naval War College professor Lyle Goldstein, there exists a plausible scenario of a Sino-Russian alliance and simultaneous armed conflict against the US. He noted that while at present Beijing strategists assess that "US strategic squeezing and containment has not yet reached a

⁷ Commander Victor L. Vescovo, "Deterring the Dragon...From (Under) the Sea", US Naval Institute *Proceedings Magazine*, February 2014, Vol. 140/2/1,332, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2014-02/deterring-dragon-under-sea>

⁸ Mike Pietrucha, "The Economics of War with China: This will hurt you more than it hurts me", *War on the Rocks*, Nov. 14, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/11/the-economics-of-war-with-china-this-will-hurt-you-more-than-it-hurts-me/>

⁹ Col Michael Peitrucha, USAFR, "Twenty First Century Aerial Mining", *Air and Space Power Journal*, March-April 2015, http://www.airpower.au.af.mil/apjinternational/apj-s/2016/2016-3/2016_3_03_pietrucha_s_eng.pdf

¹⁰ Aaron Mehta, "The Pentagon is planning for war with China and Russia: Can it handle both?" *Defense News*, January 30, 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2018/01/30/the-pentagon-is-planning-for-war-with-china-and-russia-can-it-handle-both/>

¹¹ Tom O'Connor, "Russia and NATO War Games in Europe see New Player: China", *Newsweek*, July 1, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/russia-nato-war-games-europe-player-china-630940>

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Treaty of Good Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, July 24, 2001, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/t15771.shtml

¹³ Lyle J. Goldstein, "A China-Russia Alliance?", *The National Interest*, April 25, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/china-russia-alliance-20333>



level that it is imperative for the two countries to react by forming an alliance,” the statement implies that if Washington were to ramp up the pressure, this scenario would materialize.

Given that Moscow and Beijing signed a defense pact in 1950,¹⁴ the establishment of a new version is plausible. Moreover, if China does not assist Russia when it is attacked in the Mediterranean, it may not be able to count on Russia’s help in East Asia.

Nonetheless, Washington will likely discount this scenario and envisage a quick “shock and awe” victory against the Syrian government, in what The Diplomat’s Franz-Stefan Gady coins as a “war gap”¹⁵ pathology – the failure to understand the true nature of military conflict.

Gady noted a unique American war experience that differs from those of Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Africa, where despite the US government waging continuous war since 2001, no American civilian and military infrastructure on US territory has been attacked in almost two decades of warfare. As such, Americans have a more sanitary understanding of war, which denotes conflict in a faraway country where only American troops and foreign combatants and civilians are killed.

Moreover, high-tech weaponry and “smart” bombs have dehumanized war and turned it into a video-game-like experience, “in which terms such as ‘surgical strikes’ or ‘collateral damage’ camouflage the actual brutality and consequences of aerial attacks.” War thus becomes a more manageable solution than other non-military options for US leaders, as they are geographically far removed, lack understanding of the complexity and horrors of war when it’s in one’s territory, and turn war into a more scientific, clean, and enlightened endeavor.

However, this experience is not shared by others with recent memories of mass-scale war horrors and conflict in their own territories, and they may react to military threats in a powerful way.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

Following the recent US missile strikes on Syria, US corporate media,¹⁶ military officials¹⁷ and Beltway think tanks are once again calling for further military action. Besides demanding assassinating¹⁸ President Bashar al-Assad which is illegal under both US and international law, US military build-up around Syria appears to be postured for a mass scale invasion¹⁹ similar to Iraq in 2003, not just for a few punishing airstrikes.

¹⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, “The Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance between the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union, February 1950, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80R01443R000300050007-8.pdf>

¹⁵ Franz-Stefan Gady, “Is US Suffering from ‘War Gap?’” *The Diplomat*, April 6, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/04/is-the-us-suffering-a-war-gap/>

¹⁶ David E. Sanger and Ben Hubbard, “A Hard Lesson on Syria: Assad Can Still as His Own People”, *New York Times*, April 14, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/14/us/politics/syria-chemical-weapons-analysis.html>

¹⁷ “Official: US Response to Syria is not Over”, CNN, April 14, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2018/04/14/syria-multiwave-attack-not-over-sciutto-sot.cnn>

¹⁸ Michael Rubin, “It’s time to assassinate Assad”, *The Washington Examiner*, April 10, 2018, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/its-time-to-assassinate-assadm>

¹⁹ Kate Samuelson, “The biggest U.S. navy force since Iraq invasion may be sailing towards Syria”, *Time*, April 13, 2018, <http://time.com/5239044/us-navy-warships-sailing-syria/>; Deborah Haynes, Francis Elliott, Michael Evans, Tom Parfitt, Charles Bremner, “Biggest task force since Iraq set course for Syria”, *The Sunday Times*, April 13, 2018, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/biggest-task-force-since-iraq-on-course-for-syria-bpin699bt>



Despite US Defense Secretary General Mattis²⁰ admitting that US had no evidence the Syrian government was responsible for the Idlib chemical attack in April 2017, and even before the chemical weapons watchdog OPCW (Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons) arrived in Syria to conduct an investigation in April 2018, US quickly conducted missile strikes against the Syrian government.

This promiscuous use of US military power to shoot first and ask questions later is a violation of international norms and international law, and risks further destabilizing the Middle East and EU through a new wave of refugees. If leaders in Washington decide to move forward with regime change in Syria and install a Salafi-jihadist regime that would deny Russia its only naval foothold in the Mediterranean, provide a safe haven for anti-Chinese and anti-Russian militants to launch future attacks in Xinjiang and Chechnya, and throw a monkey wrench into Xi Jinping's Belt and Road initiatives and access to Mideast energy, it is unlikely that China and Russia would remain passive to this plan.

A November 2015 article in Egypt's *Al Ahram*²¹ noted that in October 2014, one year before Russia entered the Syrian war, this author predicted Russia would enter the war if Western powers shifted the mission from countering ISIS to regime change.

It is to be hoped that my assessment in this article is wrong in 2018, but before Trump and his advisers contemplate a larger scale attack on Syria for regime change following the recent airstrikes, they need to consider the wild card – that behind the Lion of Damascus may stand not only the Russian bear, but perhaps a hidden Chinese dragon – and that they risk escalating their repeated “surgical strikes” into a full-scale great-powers war in the Mediterranean.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

²⁰ Robert Burns, “U.S. has no evidence of Assad using sarin gas, Mattis says”, PBS, February 2, 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/u-s-has-no-evidence-of-syrian-use-of-sarin-gas-mattis-says>; Ian Wilkie, “Now Mattis admits there was no evidence Assad used poison gas on his people: Opinion”, *Newsweek*, February 9, 2018, <http://www.newsweek.com/now-mattis-admits-there-was-no-evidence-assad-using-poison-gas-his-people-801542> ; https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=9&v=w-iV1G4OT3g

²¹ Nafeez Ahmed, “Russia’ Failing War in Syria”, *Al Ahram Weekly*, Issue 1269, 5-11 November 2015, , <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/13671.aspx>