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The Chinese Initiative on Syria: Beyond the Immediate Crisis

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On October 31, 2012, China deviated from its traditional posture of shunning involvement in Middle East politics, and announced a four-step program to resolve the crisis in Syria. The initiative, however, does not include concrete actions and seems powerless to change the situation. If so, is the step meaningless, or does it have some significance not apparent at first glance?

At face value, the Chinese plan seems empty of any real content. As a first stage the parties are supposed to cease the violence, but the plan offers little beyond saying that the end of violence will take place in ways allowed by the circumstances. At the second stage, the parties are to appoint representatives who will draft a roadmap for a process of political transition, with the Assad regime staying in place until the discussions are complete, to ensure political stability. At the third stage, the international community will work closely with Lahdar Brahimi, the UN and Arab League envoy to Syria, to implement international decisions already taken under UN auspices and in the Security Council. At the fourth stage, the international community will increase its efforts to resolve the humanitarian problems created by the crisis, in part by increasing aid but without politicization or militarization – a hint to what in China's view is the cynical use by the West of humanitarian aid. According to the Chinese plan, Brahimi is supposed to play a dominant role throughout the implementation, overseeing the discussions and receiving support from the region's nations and the world powers. At the same time, the plan rejects any unilateral international intervention, the use of pressure, and the forcible ouster of the Assad regime.

China's program is not expected to result in the resolution of the crisis. Not only does it fail to include concrete steps, but the life-and-death struggle between the regime and the opposition groups, and the bitter fate the losing side can anticipate, make it seemingly

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impossible to arrive at voluntary agreements to end the conflict. In addition, the legitimacy the plan gives Assad to continue ruling during the negotiations could motivate him to refuse any settlement that denies him a position of strength.

Assuming that Beijing is aware that the plan cannot in fact lead to a resolution of the crisis, the question arises as to its real purpose. The answer lies in the role China would like to play in international politics and its attempts to influence the regional agenda while minimizing criticism directed at it. Since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, China has consistently opposed unilateral action by the international community (in effect, the Western powers) against the Assad regime. In a fairly atypical move, it vetoed a Security Council initiative against the Assad regime. Similarly, it opposes giving aid to the rebels, ostensibly because this represents external interference. The basic tenet of China's stance is the preservation of sovereignty: this is a fundamental value of China's foreign policy, which rejects the forcible intervention in other nations' internal affairs. Based on this principle, the citizens of Syria should shape their own future. Another openly declared rationale for Beijing's rejection of foreign intervention in Syria is the lesson it learned from the Libyan crisis when China (along with Russia) was persuaded to support limited foreign intervention, which – to its surprise and chagrin – assumed much greater intensity than anticipated. As China sees it, it was deceived by the West.

At least four additional considerations presumably drive China's approach to Syria. First, the stability of the Iranian regime: the collapse of Assad's regime is expected to hurt Iran significantly. The survival of the Iranian regime serves both China's economic and strategic interests by blocking American dominance in the Persian Gulf. Second, the stability of the Middle East: because Syria has no opposition strong enough to step into Assad's shoes and unify the country, Beijing worries that the collapse of Assad's regime will ignite a civil war that will further erode the region's stability and negatively affect the global energy market. Third, China is demonstrating an independent stance in terms of the Western powers and exposing their weakness in leading international moves. Fourth, and possibly most important, in light of the hesitant steps taken by the Western powers on Syrian, China apparently does not think that at least for now, any strong international pressure – similar to the pressure exerted on it about Iran – will be leveled against it to operate with greater harshness towards the Assad regime.

From this perspective, even if the Chinese initiative is not expected to change the reality in Syria, it cannot be dismissed out of hand: it serves Beijing's interests well and bears another layer of significance. While China's well-known negative attitude towards Western initiatives is rooted in objections to unilateral interference in developing nations in general, and the nations of the Middle East in particular, so far China has made do with expressing its opposition and constructing international initiatives. This made the implementation of the Western initiatives difficult but also presented China as a passive,

oppositional, and self-centered nation. This not only damaged China's image in the West but also made it difficult for China to position itself as a leader among the developing nations, a role it very much wants to play. On the other hand, presenting an initiative of its own, built around Chinese fundamental worldviews – the sanctity of sovereignty, the importance of territorial integrity, rejection of forcible intervention, and promotion of international and multi-national bodies in resolving international crises – presents China as a world power that commands legitimate attention in the global discourse. Not only does this strengthen China's position in presenting its views as equal to those of the West, but it also shifts the burden of opposition and proof onto its rivals.

China's initiative also helps it deal with the harsh criticism it has received in the region and domestically about the way in which it is allowing Assad's dictatorship to butcher its own people. Because China intends to be active in the Middle East in the future, uncompromising support for Assad damages its image in the region (as well as at home) and is liable to damage its relations with whatever regime will replace him. The initiative addresses this challenge: it sets up clear limits to its support for the current regime and justifies this support with rationales that reflect both Middle East and Chinese positions – curbing the dominance of the Western powers, preserving domestic stability, and enhancing local and multi-national institutions (in which developing nations enjoy positions of strength) in resolving the crisis.

Thus while the Chinese initiative is not expected to bring the Syrian crisis any closer to a resolution, it is not to be dismissed, as its objectives go far beyond the current state of affairs in Syria. From a broader perspective, with relevance also for Israel, not only does the initiative demonstrate China's willingness to challenge, in a much deeper way than ever before, the Western principles prevalent in international and regional politics since the end of the Cold War, but it also expresses China's desire to play a more active role in Middle East politics. Considering the timing of the initiative – the eve of the Communist party congress and leadership transition – one cannot rule out the possibility that this initiative signals a broader change in China's greater approach to this region.

