



Removing Assad will harm China-US Relations

Dr. Christina Lin

November 2014

Abstract

Obama's anti-ISIS strategy has suddenly inserted an anti-Assad mission at the request of Turkey and Arab Gulf states. However, removing Assad could be a tipping point for already strained Washington-Beijing relations. By operating with a continued China blind spot and disregarding Chinese interests in its Mideast policy, US may inadvertently step into a military confrontation with Beijing.

About ISPSW

The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) is a private institute for research and consultancy. The ISPSW is objective and task oriented, and impartial to party politics.

In an ever more complex international environment of globalized economic processes and worldwide political, ecological, social and cultural change, that bring major opportunities but also risks, decision makers in enterprises and politics depend more than ever before on the advice of highly qualified experts.

ISPSW offers a range of services, including strategic analyses, security consultancy, executive coaching and intercultural competency. ISPSW publications examine a wide range of topics relating to politics, economy, international relations, and security/defence. ISPSW network experts have operated in executive positions, in some cases for decades, and command wide-ranging experience in their respective areas of specialization.



Analysis

Red Lines on Syria

President Obama is not the only actor with a red line on Syria. China, Russia and Iran also have their own red line on Damascus.

CNN on 12 November reported Obama administration is suddenly focused on removing Assad as the core of its anti-ISIS strategy, once again submitting to Turkey and Arab Gulf states that enabled ISIS to begin with, and are actually contributing very little to the anti-ISIS efforts to be dictating such orders to Washington.

Moreover, these demands are harmful to US security interests – redefining US anti-ISIS mission to one of anti-Assad mission – and thereby potentially drawing in Eurasian powers of China, Russia and Iran into open military conflict against the US.

Presently the Beijing-Moscow-Tehran axis is actually tacitly supporting the US-led coalition, and Assad is allowing US use of its airspace to strike ISIS and other Islamic extremist groups.

Now, Ankara, Riyadh and Doha's obsession on removing Assad and hoping to replace him with a proxy Islamist regime is throwing a monkey wrench into coalition efforts. With Islamist strongholds spanning from Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and Egypt, this risks turning the Eastern Mediterranean into an Islamic Lake, a threat shared by Israel as well as EU members Cyprus and Greece.

This is also a threat to US' Noble Energy, Italy's ENI, Korea's KOGAS, Russia's Gazprom, and other stakeholders such as Jordan, Egypt, and Asian consumers interested in the newly discovered natural gas resources in the Eastern Mediterranean.

As such, removing Assad for a probable Islamist replacement that will also persecute the Christian, Kurdish, Druze and Alawite communities in Syria; escalate the conflict by drawing in two nuclear powers of China and Russia; harm development of hydrocarbons in the Levantine Basin and further regional instability, is not in US or EU's security interest.

And it is definitely not in China's interest.

Obama operates with a China blind spot on Syria and the Mideast

President Obama continues to operate with large blind spots when it comes to Chinese interests, risking strategic misjudgment according to Professor Zhen Wang in a recent *The Diplomat* article.

Wang, director of the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies at Seton Hall University, argues this is not surprising given the Obama administration's China policy suffers from a rather incompetent China team, "including senior positions in the White House, the State Department, and the Pentagon, [that] are currently being held by 'young people' who don't have long-term experience in dealing with China policy...many of whom are not even China experts."

China also sees US hypocrisy and double standards in its Mideast policy.



According to a senior counter-terror advisor to China's Ministry of Public Security at the Shanghai Institute for International Affairs, while Washington criticizes Chinese support for Iran, Beijing views US keeps unsavory allies such as Turkey's AKP that is "basically Muslim Brotherhood," while its Saudi Wahhabi ally bans women from driving when "at least women in Iran are allowed to drive."

Moreover, Washington tends to assume it is still a monopolistic power operating in a Mideast vacuum without other competitors such as China and Russia.

While Moscow and Tehran have received more international scrutiny for supporting Assad, Beijing also has vital stakes in protecting this China-friendly regime.

In 2013 China overtook US as the world's largest trading nation. As such Chinese President Xi Jinping launched the Eurasian Silk Road Economic Belt to safeguard China's trading routes, with an overland route of transport corridors connecting Asia and Europe, and a maritime route connecting Indo-Pacific Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea that meets in the Middle East.

Damascus, a traditional terminus node in the ancient Silk Road, is what the Chinese call "*Ning Jiu Li*" or "cohesive force," and key link to the planned Chinese railway connecting Iran, Iraq and Syria to the Mediterranean.

While China's trade is highly dependent on the Suez Canal to reach its largest export market in Europe, after the Arab Spring and increasing instability in the Suez, Beijing is seeking alternative overland trade routes. Chinese investment in Israel's Med-Red rail connecting the Red Sea to the Mediterranean that bypasses the Suez is another key corridor.

Suez Canal security risks to Chinese shipping are real. For example, in 2011 after Mubarak was overthrown, Chinese cargo ships were severely delayed in the Suez at great costs. Turmoil following Morsi's removal further increased security risks and on 31 August 2013, China's *COSCO Asia* container ship came under fire from two rocket-propelled grenades launched by al-Furqan Brigades, an al-Qaeda affiliate, as it crossed the Suez Canal.

As Obama's misguided policy continues to foment regional instability in the Eastern Mediterranean by toppling regimes in Libya, Egypt, possibly Syria, and paving way for anti-Chinese Islamist groups that also support Uyghur separatists in Xinjiang, this directly harms Chinese economic and security interests.

Major General Jin Yanan, a strategist at China's National Defense University, disclosed that Chinese Uyghur terrorists from ETIM were joining anti-government rebels in Syria – disconcerting to Beijing since these are rebels that Turkey and Saudi Arabia in the anti-ISIS coalition intend to train – and in 2013 videos of Chinese rebels emerged that corroborates this link.

Moreover, according to counter-terror expert Jacob Zenn, the main anti-Chinese militant group Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) also has a terror network in Istanbul that recruits Chinese fighters to train in Syria and Iraq. TIP has carried out attacks in Xinjiang and claimed or praised many others, including the October 2013 suicide car bombing in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, mass stabbing attacks at Kunming and Guangzhou train stations, and double suicide bombings at the Urumqi train station in Xinjiang this year.

Beijing is thus doubling down on supporting her ally to counter Arab Gulf-influenced US policy that harms China's core interests.



Removing Assad may be “tipping point” for China-US Relations

Beijing is flexing her military muscle by arming the Assad regime and conducting gunboat diplomacy with Russia off the Syrian coast.

In February 2013, US sanctioned China's state-owned CPMIEC for military transfers to Syria that violates non-proliferation legislation, on the heels of a 2011 US Congressional Research Service report highlighting China provided Damascus with \$300 million worth of arms from 2007 to 2010.

In July 2012, *al Arabiya* reported the Syrian opposition slammed the Egyptian government for allowing a Chinese ship loaded with arms for the Assad regime to pass through the Suez Canal while in 2013 China, Iran, and Russia delivered \$500 million a month in oil and credit to Syria.

Beijing continues to protect Assad and joined Moscow in May 2014 with the fourth UN Security Council veto on a western resolution referring Syria to the International Criminal Court (ICC).

In June 2012 when Obama threatened airstrikes against the Assad regime, Chinese and Russian navy conducted gunboat diplomacy off the Syrian coast and continued with joint naval war games in January 2013 to signal support for Assad. *The Jerusalem Post* also reported China, Russia, Iran and Syria were initially planning to conduct “Middle East's largest ever military exercise” with 90,000 troops, 400 aircrafts, 1,000 tanks and hundreds of rockets.

In the case of Russia, it is unrealistic to expect Putin will relinquish his sole naval port of Tartus in the Mediterranean, nor the recently ratified \$100 million 25-year contract between Russia's Soyuzneftegaz and Assad regime for oil exploration off the Syrian coast.

Soyuzneftegaz chairman Shafranik also plans to build an oil pipeline between Iraq and Syria, and Imad Fawzi al-Shuebi from the Centre of Strategic Studies in Damascus forecasts Syrian oil production can make 6-7 million barrels daily in the future, possibly placing fourth in the world in terms of its gas reserves.

Putin has thus announced the establishment of a permanent Mediterranean naval task force to protect Russia's expanding regional interests. Similarly, Chinese security interests are also expanding in the Eastern Mediterranean.

American and Chinese analysts often warned of a “tipping point” in China-US relations beyond which the two conclude conflict is unavoidable and begin preparing for war. Indeed, bilateral relations are tense beneath the surface and on 12 November, renowned Chinese military expert Michael Pillsbury penned a *Foreign Policy* article entitled “China and the United States are preparing for war.”

He documents Chinese military's heightened level of distrust towards the US given China is the center of US war planning, thereby forcing Beijing to prepare for the eventuality of war. Chinese military officers observe American war college journals often feature articles on how to win a war against China, and a February 2014 article in the U.S. Naval Institute's *Proceedings Magazine* entitled “Deterring the Dragon” was especially threatening.¹

The author, a retired naval commander, proposed laying offensive underwater mines along China's coast to close China's main ports and destroy its sea lines of communications. Even more egregious is the recommenda-

¹ <http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2014-02/deterring-dragon-under-sea>



tion of sending special operation forces to arm China's restive minorities in Xinjiang and Tibet, at a time when Beijing is suffering from its worst terrorist attacks the past 20 months.

Nonetheless, the Middle Kingdom has a counter-measure, a famous strategy called "Sheng Dong Ji Xi" (声东击西), meaning make feint in the east and attack in the west.

Currently, Washington's eyes are on China's eastern flank in the Pacific.

However, should Obama attempt to remove Assad and pave the way for an anti-Chinese Islamist regime that supports extremist groups to attack Chinese territory, coupled with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) perception that US would arm terrorists in Xinjiang to destabilize China, Washington should not be surprised if this becomes a "tipping point" for China-US relations in China's western flank, joined by Russia and Iran.

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

About the Author of this Issue

Dr. Christina Lin is a Fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations at SAIS-Johns Hopkins University. She is the author of "The New Silk Road: China's Energy Strategy in the Greater Middle East" (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy), and a former director for China policy at the U.S. Department of Defense.



Dr. Christina Lin