



Will the Turkey/Saudi anti-Assad force draw China-Russia-Iran into a Syrian war?

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May 2015

Abstract

According to Beijing, Syria and Turkey have become the new AfPak, with Ankara behaving like Islamabad to topple its neighboring country via jihadi groups and replace it with a proxy regime. Moreover, Chinese Uyghur separatists that trained with Turkey-backed Syrian jihadi groups have launched attacks against Xinjiang. With news of Turkey's plan to invade Syria and install a proxy Islamist regime that may further export Uyghur jihadists to attack China, this may prompt Beijing to resort to military force and join Russia and Iran to defend President Assad.

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Analysis

An *AI Monitor* report on 8 May revealed that Turkey is planning to invade Syria to set up a buffer zone.¹ This follows much press murmur the previous weeks on a Saudi-Turkey alliance to train the “Army of Conquest”, an anti-Assad force stationed in northern Syria that consists of a witches brew of Al-Qaeda affiliates and various jihadi groups.

On 11 May, China and Russian navies began a two-week war game in the Mediterranean.

In September 2013, when US threatened to attack Assad, Russia deployed its naval fleet off the Syrian coast. China also sent its warships to “observe” the situation – including the *Jinggangshan*, an amphibious-landing vessel that was used earlier that year to stare down smaller nations surrounding the South China Sea.

In June 2012, embittered by western deception via UN Security Council resolutions to oust Qaddafi in Libya, China and Russia issued its 3rd veto on a western-backed blueprint for Syria. This was followed by reports of a large-scale military exercise involving China, Russia, Iran and Syria to prevent a potential western military intervention to remove Assad, and avoid another “Libya” *redux*.

Were the timing of these war games and gunboat diplomacy coincidences, or are China and Russia signaling their red lines regarding Syria?

Although the 2012 joint war games did not materialize – reportedly involving 90,000 soldiers from the four countries, 400 planes, 1,000 tanks, and 12 Chinese warships – the key issue here is not how many troops but who are involved.² Given the rapid pace of military cooperation among China, Russia, and Iran the past years, a possible war game involving these three Eurasian powers along with Syria may be in the offing in 2015.

In September 2013, observing the massing of Chinese, Russian and NATO warships off the Syrian coast, China watcher Gordon Chang noted Westerners erroneously assume Moscow and Beijing would passively “watch the US Navy and other NATO forces pound their ally Syria into rubble.” This was a dangerous misperception and miscalculation, and had risked the West stumbling into a military confrontation with these Eurasian nuclear powers.

Now Erdogan and the Saudi Wahhabis would be wise to approach Syria with eyes wide open, and see that Assad is not a Qaddafi nor operates in a vacuum. The Turkey/Saudi anti-Assad strategy is in effect an anti-Sino-Russian-Iran axis strategy, as well as an anti-US coalition strategy. Any subsequent attempt by Erdogan to invoke article 5 and drag NATO into his military adventurism in Syria, would not only spill over into a great power conflict, but also harm the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition that is tacitly supported by the Eurasian Triple Entente.

Erdogan’s Syrian agenda threatens China’s core interests

While much ink has been spilled on Russia and Iran’s interests in supporting Assad, there has been relatively little coverage of China’s interests. For Russia, Syria offers a warm water naval port as well as lucrative energy contracts to explore its offshore fields, while Iran can extend its influence in the region. Thus Syria provides an outlet for Russia and Iran’s **external** power projection.

¹ Fehim Tastekin, “Turks Fear Saudi Alliance Will Drag Country into War”, *AI Monitor*, 8 May 2015 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/turkey-saudi-arabia-partnership-a-war-chant.html>; Kim Sengupta, “Syria crisis: Turkey and Saudi Arabia shock Western countries by supporting Anti-Assad jihadists” *The Independent*, 11 May 2015.

² Joanna Paraszczuk, “Iran, Russia, China, Syria plan largest ‘war game’” *The Jerusalem Post*, 19 June 2012, <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Iran-Russia-China-Syria-plan-largest-war-game>



Ironically for China, Syrian stability and Assad's staying power has become an **internal** core interest – involving energy security, territorial integrity in the “One China Policy”, and internal stability of Xinjiang.

Firstly, China needs friendly regimes in the Mideast for its energy supply that fuels economic growth and supports the Communist regime's legitimacy and survival. Thus energy security means regime survival.

China fears western military intervention in crucial energy markets could restrict Beijing's access to oil and gas, and in the case of Libya, China lost more than \$20 billion worth of investments overnight. When China urged NTC to protect its oil interests, it was shocked when Libyan oil company AGOCO announced they “don't have a problem with Western countries, but may have political issues with Russia and China.” Thus China will prevent installation of western-backed anti-Chinese regimes in energy-rich countries to cut off China's energy supply.

Secondly, China needs Mideast support of its “One China policy” and territorial integrity of its Muslim province Xinjiang. Despite cordial Chinese declaratory policy towards Turkey, Beijing is distrustful of Erdogan and his Islamist agenda, especially his public support for Xinjiang separatism to become an independent East Turkestan under Turkey's influence.

Back in 1995, while Erdogan was mayor of Istanbul, he named a section of the Sultan Ahmet (Blue Mosque) park after Isa Yusuf Alptekin, leader of East Turkestan independence movement and China's archenemy in the 1990s. After Alptekin's death, Erdogan erected a memorial in the park to commemorate Eastern Turkistani *Sehitlerin*, or martyrs, who lost their lives in the “struggle for independence.”

In 2009, bilateral relations reached a nadir when he labeled Chinese crackdown in Xinjiang as “genocide” and in 2014, AKP's mouthpiece *Daily Sabah* began to be used as a platform for similar anti-Chinese rhetoric.

Moreover, a July 2014 article challenged the legitimacy of China's claims over Xinjiang and featured the vice president of World Uyghur Congress announcing, “East Turkestan issue is under Turkey's responsibility.” Ankara further challenged Beijing's authority over Chinese Uyghurs when in November it offered to shelter illegal Uyghur refugees caught in Thailand, prompting China's quick rebuke for Turkey to stop interfering in China's internal affairs and supporting “illegal immigration...[that] harm security of the relevant countries and regions.”³

As such the Chinese are understandably suspicious of Turkey supporting Xinjiang separatism and have accused Ankara of enabling Chinese Uyghur jihadists to transit to Syria and Iraq to train with al-Qaeda affiliates and ISIS. According to counter terror expert Jacob Zenn, the Uyghur terrorist group Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) also has a network in Istanbul to recruit Chinese fighters. Thus from the Chinese vantage point, an anti-Assad force trained by Turkey is also likely an anti-Chinese force.

Thirdly, China needs friendly Mideast regimes for Xinjiang stability. In Syria, Assad is pro-Chinese while Turkey-Qatar backed Muslim Brotherhood is anti-Chinese. In 2012, Syria's Muslim Brotherhood spokesman Zouheir Salem accused China, Russia and Iran as complicit⁴ in Syrian massacres while Jordan's Brotherhood leader Hamma Saeed called for a boycott⁵ of Chinese and Russian goods.

³ Michael Martina etl al, “China rebukes Turkey for offer to shelter Uighur refugees” *Reuters*, 28 November 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/11/28/us-china-turkey-thailand-idUSKCN0JC0X920141128>

⁴ “Syria's Brotherhood: Russia, China, Iran complicit in killings”, *Middle East Onnline*, 6 February 2012, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=50486>

⁵ “Jordan Muslim Brotherhood: Russia and China Justify Al-Assad's Crimes in Syria, Must Be boycotted”, *Ikhwanweb*, 6 February 2012. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=29640>



Moreover, if Turkey installs a Brotherhood regime in Syria, Moscow and Beijing fear this would unleash a wave of Muslim-led destabilizations across Central Asia, Russia's Chechnya and China's Xinjiang. According to former Indian Ambassador to Turkey K. Gajendra Singh, "Syria has the second, most well-organized Muslim Brotherhood organization after Egypt."

Syria and Turkey the new AfPak

Turkey's PM Davutoğlu has proclaimed that ISIS could not be defeated unless Assad was toppled. However, the real reason for ISIS resilience appears to be Turkey's logistical support of weapons and a steady flow of foreign fighters backed by Saudi/Qatari funding. After all, the forebear of ISIS was Al-Qaeda in Iraq, the same salafi jihadists/al-Qaeda affiliates in the anti-Assad force.

The Chinese rightly call Syria the new Afghanistan and see Turkey as a meddling Pakistan. And just as China is cracking down on Pakistan's complicity of anti-Chinese jihadists in its tribal region that launch attacks against Xinjiang, Beijing may soon have to crack down on Turkey's support of anti-Chinese jihadists in Syria that threaten Xinjiang, and align with Russia and Iran to defend Assad.

Is Turkey ready for war with these Eurasian powers?

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

About the Author of this Issue

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