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**CHINA'S POLICY ON THE SYRIAN CRISIS: FEATURES AND PRIORITIES**

The purpose of this article is to analyze the peculiarities of China's policy on the Syrian crisis in the context of its regional and national interests. The research examines the main principles underlying the PRC's Syrian crisis strategy; the methods and instruments of practical implementation of China's anti-crisis policy, as well as its impact on the PRC's regional positions; the interests of China that influence the formation of Beijing's approach to the conflict in Syria. The author believes that active involvement of Chinese diplomacy in overcoming the Syrian crisis became an essential step in the overall strengthening of the PRC's regional role. China's economic interests in Syria are intertwined with national security considerations (the Uighur issue) and geostrategic ambitions (Belt and Road Initiative). Beijing also seeks to enhance its status on the world stage by playing an active role in conflict resolution outside its traditional area of influence.

**Key words:** China, the Middle East, Syrian crises, Arab countries.

**Introduction.** The Syrian conflict has been going on for more than eight years. It has led to the significant destabilization of the Middle East region, as well as the significant transformation of the regional and global balance of power. China, along with the United States and Russia, plays a vital role in this conflict. This role builds on unique economic opportunities and promotes Beijing to the center of events that determine the further development of regional political processes. China's status in the course of Syrian events is changing: it is moving from the category of major participants to the position of one of the leaders in the settlement. This fact makes the focus of this article particularly relevant.

The **purpose** of this article is to uncover the peculiarities of China's policy on the Syrian crisis in the context of its regional and national interests. In this regard, it is advisable to analyze the following aspects:

- the main principles underlying the PRC's strategy on Syrian conflict;
- the methods and instruments of practical implementation of China's anti-crisis policy, as well as its impact on the PRC's regional positions;
- national and regional (within the Middle East) interests of the PRC that influence the formation of Beijing's approach to the conflict in Syria;

– a possible evolution of China’s policy on this issue in the future.

The main **hypothesis** of this study is that the active involvement of Chinese diplomacy in overcoming the Syrian crisis has become an important step in the overall strengthening of Beijing’s regional and international positions.

The research bases on a qualitative **methodology** covering textual analysis of documents and materials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC [5; 15; 19]; speeches by Chinese and Syrian officials [10; 17; 22]; works by Chinese, Arab, American, Ukrainian, and Russian specialists in international relations and security studies.

**Analysis of previous studies.** The vast majority of current historiography on the issue is devoted either to the overall strategy of the PRC in the Middle East or to the analysis of Beijing’s bilateral relations with the countries of the region. As for the PRC’s policy on the Syrian crisis, it is insufficiently covered and needs more detailed examination.

The works of Chinese political scientists deserve highlighting among noteworthy publications. In particular, Honorary Fellow of PLA Academy of Military Science Zhou Bo [23], Senior Fellow at Charhar Institute He Wenping [6] and Wang Jin [18] explore Beijing’s current Middle Eastern strategy in the context of its national interests. Director of Security Studies Program at Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Wang Zhen [20] and President of China Institute of International Studies Qu Xing [12] highlight essential aspects of China’s policy on the Syrian crisis. Overall, researchers from the PRC highly appreciate Beijing’s anti-crisis policies and predict that China’s involvement in regional processes will increase in the future.

The strengthening of China’s position in the Middle East, as well as its active diplomacy in Syria, have attracted considerable attention from US and Russian political scientists, which was reflected in the works of Director of the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies Jon B. Alterman [1]; *the East Asia Program’s fellows at the Stimson Center* Logan Pauley and Jesse Marks [11]; Mollie Saltskog and Colin P. Clarke from *the RAND Corporation* [13]; Peter Wood from the Jamestown Foundation [21]; Russian expert on China M. V. Kazanin [7].

*Assistant Professor at the Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government in Dubai* Guy Burton [2], *Fadi Esber from the Damascus History Foundation* [4] and *an Amman-based researcher* Nicholas Lyall [8] focus their researches on China’s role in the reconstruction of Syria. Some aspects of China’s Middle East policy are also analyzed in a few studies by Ukrainian scholars, in particular, Sedlyar Y. [14], Parkhomchuk O. A. and Kononenko M. G. [9].

**Outline of the main research material.** Relations with the countries of the Middle East occupy a crucial place in Chinese foreign policy. Three factors determine the importance of the region for the PRC. First, Beijing is one of the world’s largest oil importers, with the majority of Chinese imports coming from the countries of the Middle East. Second, the Middle East region is one of the largest markets for Chinese goods. Third, the growing activity of terrorist and extremist groups in the region is an increasing concern for the PRC’s leadership.

The aggravation of the situation in the Middle East is a direct threat to the national interests of the Chinese state. In this context, Beijing's motivation in resolving the Syrian crisis as quickly as possible is quite clear.

Since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, the PRC has been following a consistent policy that can be summarized in five points expressed by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Geneva II Conference on the Syrian conflict: first, the issue must be resolved through political means; second, the future of Syria must be decided by its own people; third, an inclusive political transition process must be promoted; fourth, national reconciliation and unity must be achieved in Syria; fifth, humanitarian assistance must be delivered in Syria and its neighbouring countries [19].

Preventing foreign intervention in the Syrian conflict has become a priority of China's regional policy in the Middle East, which directly affects its relations with the United States. In shaping this approach, Beijing primarily took the lessons of the 2011 Libyan crisis into account. At that time, it abstained from voting for resolution 1973 in the UN Security Council, which provided for the creation of no-fly zone undertaken to protect civilians under attack from the Qaddafi regime. As President of China Institute of International Studies Qu Xing points, later Beijing concluded that the US and NATO had grossly exceeded the UN mandate by embarking on a much broader mission to overthrow the Libyan government [12].

Chinese officials sharply criticized the military actions in Libya, declaring China's opposition to the use of force in international relations and called for an immediate ceasefire. Equally important to Beijing's argument was that by opposing military interference in the internal affairs of individual countries, China also protects itself from the threat of interference in its internal affairs.

In implementing the principle mentioned above, Beijing, along with Moscow, has repeatedly used its veto power in the UN Security Council to block US proposals aimed at punishing Assad's regime. Chinese officials stated that such resolutions violate basic norms regarding sovereignty and undermine existing mediation efforts toward a political solution. In total, the PRC vetoed UN resolutions on Syria 6 times [23]. This fact is noteworthy since Beijing has exercised its veto power only 11 times during its membership.

At the same time, China has repeatedly urged the international community, through the UN, to present a united front in calling on all sides of the conflict to discard violence and address problems through dialogue. Beijing has also repeatedly expressed support for the implementation of the Syria Action Group's Communiqué adopted in Geneva — a plan for a political resolution that avoided explicitly calling for Assad's resignation, the relevant Security Council resolutions (2042 and 2043), and the six-point plan for political settlement presented by Kofi Annan [16]. Since the onset of the crisis, China has seldom been absent from international forums aimed at contriving a political resolution.

Beijing has also shown itself to be a consistent supporter of dialogue between government forces and opposition. From 2011 to 2016, several Syrian

opposition delegations visited China and were hosted by high-level Chinese diplomats [5]. Thus, the PRC has made it clear that it will not give any preferential support to any parties including the Syrian government, and Beijing would take a positive and open-minded attitude towards any political solutions so long as all Syrian parties can accept them. China has also provided through multiple channels humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people, including refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and other neighbouring countries.

China's involvement in the Syrian settlement significantly intensified in 2016. The Chinese Foreign Ministry introduced a new post of Special Representative of the PRC on the Syrian issue. An experienced diplomat Xie Xiaoyan was appointed to the post. It was the first time in the history of the PRC's foreign policy institution that the word «issue» appears in the name of the Special Representative, indicating the seriousness of the Chinese leadership's approach to solving the Syrian problem [7].

Since his appointment, Xie Xiaoyan has been to several Middle Eastern states and has also repeatedly participated in ministerial meetings of the «Friends of Syria» group. The regular visits of the Special Representative and other Chinese diplomats to the countries of the region for consultations and negotiations on the most pressing issues of the current situation in Syria allowed Beijing to respond quickly to emerging problems and actively complete mediation tasks.

China's position in Syria is not only about respecting the principles of state sovereignty and the peaceful settlement of conflicts but also deeper motives and interests, above all — the **geostrategic** ones. Sitting in a vital position in the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Syria provides a more direct avenue for the PRC to enter the Mediterranean Sea [6]. This global strategy announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in September 2013 envisages the creation of an extensive infrastructure network from China's western borders to the eastern and southern borders of the EU. The new transport corridors will help optimize supplies, reduce the cost of many Chinese goods, strengthen Chinese positions in European and Asian markets, as well as provide access to new ones, such as in Africa. BRI will also expand Beijing's geopolitical influence as it will encompass a large number of countries, linking their economies and resources (technological, human, financial, and political).

The Middle East is an important transit point on the path between Asia and Europe and is key to realizing the ambitious BRI concept. In this regard, Syria's instability is hampering Chinese plans. At the same time, an essential task for Beijing is to strike a balance in its Middle East policy: to prevent serious complications with the countries of the region, especially leading oil exporters, while maintaining the course of peaceful settlement of the Syrian crisis.

Currently, China has relations at the level of «comprehensive strategic partnership» with four Middle Eastern countries: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Iran. Saudi Arabia is Beijing's largest trading partner in West Asia as well as the largest oil supplier to China. The PRC is

also the largest trading partner of the United Arab Emirates, and the port of Dubai is a vital global transport and logistics center for Chinese goods. China has invested billions of dollars in Egypt as part of the transit of goods through the Suez Canal. It is noteworthy that since taking office in 2014, President of Egypt Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has paid at least six visits to Beijing (compared to two trips to Washington). The PRC and Iran have developed a broad relationship, including arms sales, defense and energy cooperation [18]. No less prominent place in the list of China's Middle Eastern partners belongs to Israel. Cooperation with Israel in the field of advanced technologies, security matters, and the fight against terrorism is a priority for Beijing.

The above countries are long-standing antagonists in the Middle East system of regional relations, and they also have diametrically opposite views on the Syrian crisis and other challenges to regional security. One of the main reasons for the significant progress in relations between the PRC and the key states of the region in the context of the conflict around Syria is that in the previous period, China was able to significantly strengthen its position in the Middle East by rapidly expanding trade and economic cooperation. The economic factor in relations between the PRC and the states of the region has acquired special significance and allows to exert political influence on the diplomatic preferences of the latter.

Director of the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies Jon B. Alterman believes, that the main feature of the Middle East strategy of the PRC is that it builds relations not with the region as a whole but with its individual countries, taking into account their national characteristics and priority areas of cooperation [1]. This fundamentally distinguishes the Chinese approach from the American one. In his speech made at the Arab League headquarters in 2016 President Xi Jinping specified: instead of looking for a proxy in the Middle East, China promotes peace talks; instead of seeking any sphere of influence, China calls on all countries to join the circle of friends for the «Belt and Road»; instead of attempting to fill the «vacuum», China builds a cooperative partnership network for mutual benefits and win-win results [22].

In turn, the Arab countries find China not only a reliable partner but also an alternative force in the Middle East. The PRC is seen as a relatively honest broker since it does not carry the same historical baggage as the United States or European countries, due to its very limited presence in the region in the past.

In addition to geostrategic considerations, **security issues** play an important role for China in the context of the Syrian crisis. China's policy in Syria is linked to its desire to be a more serious player in the global counterterrorism struggle, which is driven by its domestic agenda.

The separatism of Uighurs, a Muslim minority living in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in northwestern China, is a primary national security concern. Several radical groups are operating on the territory of XUAR, the most active of which is the Islamic Movement of East Turkestan. The group consists mainly of Chinese Uighurs and declares the need

to separate Xinjiang from the PRC and to establish an independent Uighur theocratic (Sunni) state there. It fights the Chinese authorities in XUAR and carries out terrorist attacks in other regions of the PRC [3].

The Uighur issue is particularly sensitive for Beijing due to the critical geostrategic location of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. Xinjiang is a vital part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative: the main logistics channels pass through it.

The purpose of the Uighur radicals is not only to destabilize the situation in the western regions of China but also to deepen ties with terrorist organizations abroad, in particular in the Middle East. Chinese Uighurs traveled to Syria and joined several terrorist groups, including the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra. According to the Syrian ambassador to China Imad Moustapha, estimated 5,000 Chinese Uighurs are currently fighting in Syria, most of which are concentrated in Idlib [17].

Fighters returning from Syria are becoming a significant threat to China's domestic security, and those remaining in the Middle East are threatening Beijing's economic interests, jeopardizing the implementation of Belt and Road concept. The involvement of the Islamic Movement of East Turkestan in the terrorist attack near the Chinese Embassy in Kyrgyzstan on August 30, 2016, testified to the transition to a new level.

In 2017, the Islamic State issued its first direct threat against China, releasing a video in which Uighur fighters vow to return home and attack their country. The same year, the PRC reportedly deployed the first Chinese Army Special Forces unit, «the Night Tigers», to assist the Syrian government's counterterrorism operations [11]. China also approved Security Council resolutions 2170 and 2178 to attack the IS. However, it is the only one among the permanent members of the UN Security Council that has not taken military action against the IS. As Director of Security Studies Program at Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Wang Zhen explains, China is neither militarily strong enough, nor it has the political will and social support for a strike on the IS forces [20].

Finally, in its foreign policy strategy, Beijing attaches traditionally high importance to **economic interests**. Chinese business has already significantly increased its presence in Syria, and the PRC today accounts for 80 % of all Damascus's foreign trade. Due to the lack of trade relations between Syria and the West, China's role here has grown and continues to grow.

An important direction in Beijing's Syrian policy may be its participation in the post-war reconstruction process of the country. The government of President Bashar al-Assad says it will need \$195 billion to rebuild the country, while the World Bank estimates that it could be up to \$250 billion — four times Syria's GDP in 2010 [2].

The Chinese leadership has repeatedly stated its willingness to participate in the restoration of the SAR actively. The PRC's priorities are investments in the development of transport infrastructure, oil, defense, medicine, and telecommunications. In July 2017, Beijing hosted the First Trade Fair on Syrian Reconstruction Projects, at which the PRC committed to contribute \$2

billion toward rebuilding Syrian industry, and unveiled a plan to construct an industrial estate that could house up to 150 companies [4]. In September 2018, China sent a delegation of 200 companies to the 60th Damascus International Trade Fair, where they pledged deals ranging from car manufacturing to development of mobile hospitals [8].

In response, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said that Chinese companies are expected to play a significant role in the future reconstruction phase and the Syrian government will give priority to Chinese companies in investment and reconstruction opportunities. He also praised the PRC's humanitarian assistance to refugee aid programs, especially in neighbouring Lebanon [10].

Now, when the situation in Syria enters a new stage and the political settlement momentum rises, relations between two countries also face new development opportunities. According to Special Representative Xie Xiaoyan, in the next phase the Chinese side will focus on five aspects: first, continue maintaining communication with all relevant parties, and deeply call on various parties to promote peace talks; second, continue supporting the UN's role as the main channel for mediation; third, continue actively participating in Geneva Peace Talks, the International Syria Support Group and other peace-promotion mechanisms; fourth, continue offering assistance within capacity to the Syrian people; fifth, support Syria's reconstruction process in proper ways [15].

The increasing threat of domestic terrorism motivates China to strengthen military cooperation with Syria and other states in the Middle East. The PRC is already making important inroads into the region, including opening a large naval base in Djibouti, where it can deploy thousands of troops close to the Mandeb Strait. It has also provided, albeit limited, military assistance to Damascus. Following the visit of Chinese Admiral Guan Youfei in 2016 to Syria, the Chinese military has been present in Syria to train Syrian forces on Chinese-made weapons, intelligence gathering, logistics, and field medicine [21]. In 2015 Beijing approved a counter-terrorism law that explicitly legalized the use of special forces and other units abroad, if approved by the Central Military Commission. This enabled China to deploy its special forces to Syria in 2017 to combat the growing Uighur militant presence there. In addition to this, the U. S. withdrawal from Syria will allow the PRC to use its new counterterrorism policy as a foothold to increase its influence in the region and beyond [13].

*Conclusions.* China certainly sees the Syrian civil war as an international crisis where it needs to be a responsible stakeholder and provide assistance and mediation. For the past eight years, China has been taking prudent but decisive steps, refraining from engaging directly in the Syrian conflict. The PRC's anti-crisis policy is focused primarily on ensuring non-interference of foreign states in Syrian affairs. China's voting strategy in the Security Council is tied to projecting an image of Beijing as a newfound bastion of multilateralism and protector of peace. Beijing has emphasized the need for a political solution that respects Damascus's sovereignty and has subsequently stepped up its efforts to play a mediating role in the crisis.

The most tangible security threat for the PRC emanating from Syria is the terrorism linkage formed by Chinese Uighurs with their Syrian counterparts. The rapid development of Belt and Road Initiative also encourages Beijing to seek a more prominent political and economic role in Syria. Finally, China is set to be the major player in the impending rebuilding process that will occur in postwar Syria.

China's moves in Syria are well-calculated and highly correlated with its general regional policy, which aims to develop long-term relationships with virtually all Middle Eastern states. The Chinese are working on the formation of the image of a friendly and responsible power in the region quite successfully. Beijing also seeks to enhance its status on the world stage by playing an active role in conflict resolution outside its traditional area of influence. Watching the US-Russia struggle on the Syrian arena, China is trying to position itself as an impartial as well as the most responsible international player among the three world powers.

Regarding the possibility of military involvement, given the complex interconnectivity of the various stakeholders in Syria, the PRC will likely maintain its «low profile» policy and will not take direct military action in Syria. At the same time, ensuring the stability of the Middle East region, along with the expansion of its own role in counter-terrorism as a core component of its foreign policy, will continue being an essential priority for the PRC.

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## **ПОЛІТИКА КНР ЩОДО СИРІЙСЬКОЇ КРИЗИ: ОСОБЛИВОСТІ ТА ПРІОРИТЕТИ**

### **Резюме**

В статті аналізуються особливості політики КНР щодо сирійської кризи в контексті її регіональних та національних інтересів. Зокрема висвітлюються основні принципи, на яких базується стратегія Китаю щодо сирійського конфлікту; методи та інструменти практичної реалізації антикризової політики Пекіну, а також її вплив на регіональні позиції КНР.

З початку сирійського конфлікту в 2011 р. Китай дотримується послідовної політики, що базується на трьох основних принципах: невтручання в конфлікт та забезпечення суверенітету й територіальної цілісності Сирії; протидія використанню збройних сил та насильницькому поваленню влади; сприяння політичному вирішенню конфлікту. КНР виступає в якості посередника в переговорах, одночасно залучаючись до проєктів із післявоєнного відновлення країни. Паралельно з цим Китай намагається забезпечити баланс своєї близькосхідної політики та не допустити серйозних ускладнень з країнами регіону, що дотримуються протилежних позицій у сирійському конфлікті.

Економічні інтереси КНР в Сирії переплітаються з міркуваннями національної безпеки (уйгурське питання) та геостратегічними амбіціями (ініціатива «Один пояс, один шлях»). Крім того, Пекін прагне підвищити свій статус на світовій арені, граючи активну роль у вирішенні конфліктів поза межами своєї традиційної зони впливу. Активна участь китайської дипломатії у подоланні сирійської кризи стала важливим етапом загального посилення як регіональних, так і міжнародних позицій Пекіну. Швидкий розвиток ініціативи «Один пояс, один шлях» спонукає Пекін шукати більш помітну політичну і економічну роль в Сирії. Китай стане основним гравцем у процесі відновлення, який відбудеться в післявоєнній Сирії. Дії Китаю в Сирії пов'язані з його загальною регіональною політикою, яка спрямована на розвиток довгострокових відносин практично з усіма державами Близького Сходу. Китайці успішно працюють над формуванням іміджу дружньої і відповідальної держави в регіоні. Пекін також прагне підвищити свій статус на світовій арені, граючи активну роль у вирішенні конфліктів за межами своєї традиційної зони впливу.

**Ключеві слова:** КНР, Близький Схід, сирійська криза, арабські країни.

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## **ПОЛИТИКА КНР В ОТНОШЕНИИ СИРИЙСКОГО КРИЗИСА: ОСОБЕННОСТИ И ПРИОРИТЕТЫ**

### **Резюме**

В статье анализируются особенности политики КНР в отношении сирийского кризиса в контексте ее региональных и национальных интересов. В частности освещаются основные принципы, на которых базируется стратегия Китая в отношении сирийского конфликта; методы и инструменты практической реализации антикризисной политики Пекина, а также ее влияние на региональные позиции КНР.

С начала сирийского конфликта в 2011 г. Китай придерживается последовательной политики, которая базируется на трех основных принципах: невмешательство в конфликт и обеспечение суверенитета и территориальной целостности Сирии; противодействие использованию вооруженных сил и насильственному свержению власти; содействие политическому урегулированию конфликта. КНР выступает в качестве посредника в переговорах, одновременно приобщаясь к проектам по послевоенному восстановлению страны. Параллельно с этим Китай старается обеспечить баланс своей ближневосточной политики и не допустить серьезных осложнений со странами региона, которые придерживаются противоположных позиций в сирийском конфликте.

Экономические интересы КНР в Сирии переплетаются с соображениями национальной безопасности (уйгурский вопрос) и геостратегическими амбициями (инициатива «Один пояс, один путь»). Кроме того, Пекин стремится повысить свой статус на мировой арене, играя активную роль в урегулировании конфликтов за пределами своей традиционной зоны влияния. Активное участие китайской дипломатии в урегулировании сирийского кризиса стало важным этапом общего усиления как региональных, так и международных позиций Пекина. Быстрое развитие инициативы «Один пояс, один путь» побуждает Пекин играть более заметную политическую и экономическую роль в Сирии. Китай станет основным игроком в процессе восстановления, который произойдет в послевоенной Сирии. Действия Китая в Сирии связаны с его общей региональной политикой, которая направлена на развитие долгосрочных отношений практически со всеми государствами Ближнего Востока. Китайцы успешно работают над формированием имиджа дружественной и ответственной державы в регионе. Пекин также стремится повысить свой статус на мировой арене, играя активную роль в разрешении конфликтов за пределами своей традиционной зоны влияния.

**Ключевые слова:** КНР, Ближний Восток, сирийский кризис, арабские страны.