

China warns against a repeat of the Iraq war in Syria

John Chan
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Amid the escalating threat of a US-led war against Syria, the Chinese state media has reacted angrily to what would be another blow to China's interests in the Middle East.

Officially, Beijing has called for calm. On Wednesday, Foreign Minister Wang Yi declared: "All parties should handle the chemical weapons issue cautiously to avoid interfering in the overall direction of solving the Syrian issue through political settlement." At the same time, he backed a UN investigation and restated China's opposition to the use of chemical weapons.

At present, Beijing is clearly lining up behind Russia, Syria's main ally. The *People's Daily*, the mouthpiece of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP), warned on Wednesday against a repetition of the illegal US-led invasion of Iraq. "The essence of the Iraq war was to circumvent the United Nations and change the government of a sovereign nation with the aid of force," it stated, calling on "the international community" to be on "high alert for certain foreign forces repeating this method in Syria."

China, together with Russia, has consistently blocked any resolution in the UN Security Council against the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad and is likely to do so again. In 2011, China, together with Russia, caved in to US pressure and did not veto a UN resolution allowing the imposition of a "no fly zone" in Libya. The result was a US-led regime change operation that led to the loss of billions of dollars worth of Chinese investment in that country.

While China has no major oil interests in Syria, Beijing is well aware that any regime change in Syria would be a prelude for a US war against Iran, where China has significant energy interests. Moreover, facing relentless pressure from the Obama administration's

"pivot to Asia," Beijing has strengthened its ties with Moscow to protect their mutual interests. If China lined up with the US against Syria, its strategic partnership with Russia would be undermined.

There are divisions within Chinese security and foreign policy circles over how to respond to a US war on Syria.

Shen Dingli, from Shanghai's Fudan University, who called for "common ground" between the US and China over Syria last year, told *Voice of America* that if the US intervention took place, Beijing would not be upset. "China openly opposes any intervention, but in reality it would welcome and even hopes for intervention."

Shen speaks for sections of the Chinese regime looking for a compromise with Washington that would put an end to the US military build-up in Asia, which threatens Chinese strategic and economic interests. He argued that, as in the Iraq war, the US would become bogged down, and the pressure of the US "pivot" on China would be eased.

The Iraq war did provide a breathing space for China. Its economy rapidly expanded during the past decade, overtaking all of the G7 powers, except the US, to become the world's second largest economy. Now, however, in the midst of the worsening global economic crisis, the US is determined to halt China's growing economic and strategic influence. The US regime-change operation in Syria is part of the same overall US strategy as the "pivot to Asia"—to secure US domination in the Middle East and globally against any potential rival, especially China.

Significantly, US defence secretary Chuck Hagel concluded a week-long tour of South East Asia this week, even as he was busy dealing with European allies and preparing for war against Syria. Hagel repeatedly

emphasised that Washington was serious about its “rebalancing” to Asia despite the Syrian crisis, saying the US commitment to the region was “deep and unshakable.”

Hagel announced an increase by 50 percent, to \$90 million, of annual US military training aid to South East Asian countries. At the same time, he reinforced US support for countries like Vietnam and the Philippines, which are pushing their maritime disputes with China in the South China Sea. Hagel warned China that its “more aggressive pursuit of claims could provoke a conflict.”

A commentary in the *Global Times* reflected the views of those in the CCP bureaucracy and Chinese capitalist elite who advocate a more hardline defence of their interests. It called on countries opposing the military intervention to “unite to prevent as far as possible the US, UK and others from launching air strikes against Syria” and “openly support the Syrian government to engage in resistance.”

The commentary suggested that Russia and Iran should provide “direct military assistance” to Syria, while China and other countries should give other forms of support. As the *Global Times* is undoubtedly aware, this risks dragging Russia, Iran and even China into a confrontation with the US.

Yan Xuetong, the dean of the Institute of Modern International Relations at Tsinghua University, was cited in the *New York Times* as advocating an alliance with Russia to counter US aggression. He explained that within the CCP, “there is still a strong force against abandoning the [present] non-aligned strategy.” He argued, however, that China should “totally abandon” this stance and formally align itself militarily with Russia.

These responses in Beijing underline the utter recklessness of US foreign policy as it prepares to launch another criminal, neo-colonial war in the Middle East. US strikes against Syria threaten to draw the entire region into the war, and trigger a conflict with Russia and China that could become a global conflagration.



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