



中国简报 China Brief

PUBLISHED BY THE JAMESTOWN FOUNDATION

[Home](#) [Contact Us](#)

China Brief

- : [About](#)
- : [Editor's Bio](#)

Archives

- : [By Vol/Issue](#)
- : [By Subject](#)

The Analysts

Recent Reports

Other Jamestown Publications

- : [Eurasia Daily Monitor](#)
- : [Global Terrorism Analysis](#)
- : [North Caucasus Weekly](#)

Events

Subscribe


- : [Subscribe Now](#)
- : [Update Your Subscription](#)



1111 16th St. NW
Suite #320
Washington, DC 20036
202.483.8888
202.483.8337 fax
pubs@jamestown.org

26 October 2008

China Brief

Volume 8, Issue 20 (October 23, 2008) |  [Download PDF Version](#)

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

- [Global Crisis Presents Challenges and Opportunities for China's Economic Reform](#)
- [China En Route to Cap Antarctica](#)
- [China's Reaction to the North Korean Succession Crisis](#)
- [Hu's New Deal and the Third Plenary Session of CCP's 17th Central Committee](#)
- [The Geopolitics of Sino-Syrian Relations](#)
- [Advances in PLA Air Defense Capabilities Challenge Strategic Balance in Asia](#)

The Geopolitics of Sino-Syrian Relations

By [Chris Zambelis](#)

Solidifying the People's Republic of China's (PRC) burgeoning relationships with the countries of the Middle East remains a top priority for Beijing. The impetus behind China's resurgent efforts to extend its influence within the Middle East stemmed from Beijing's pursuit of energy resources to sustain its rapidly expanding economy. As the world's fastest growing consumer of oil and third-largest net importer of oil, energy will continue to be the most important motivating factor shaping China's foreign policy toward the Middle East in the foreseeable future [1]. The looming global economic downturn will also prompt China to seek out new consumer markets for Chinese-made goods amid rising consumer fears and shrinking global demand from developed markets.



Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (L) and Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao (R)

The determinants of Chinese strategic thinking toward the Middle East, however, transcend the issues of energy security and market access, and in many respects have changed dramatically, especially since the Cold War. China is widely recognized as a rising power that is becoming increasingly confident in exerting its newfound leverage to assert its interests and shape geopolitics in its favor. Consequently, China is keen on projecting its influence in the Middle East, a region where it was largely relegated to the sidelines amid the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Throughout much of the Cold War, China viewed the Middle East as an opportunity to showcase its revolutionary credentials by criticizing its more powerful Soviet rival, albeit from afar, for not doing enough to empower countries such as Syria and the peoples of the region (or, in some cases, for acting as an imperial power, in its view, on par with the United States and the West) [2].

China's controversial decision to export intermediate-range ballistic missile systems and related technology, to Syria and other states in the region in the late 1980s and early 1990s represented Beijing's first significant inroads as an actor in the Middle East with the potential to shift the balance of power on the ground [3]. Moscow's refusal to augment Syria's missile capabilities with a long-range capability during the waning days of the Cold War drove Damascus to seek other partners to bolster its military capabilities. Consequently, Chinese arms sales at the time contained an ideological component that sought to fill the void left by the

decline of Soviet influence in Syria and the Middle East. Furthermore, a key factor behind the missile sales (and other arms sales) to Syria and other countries, however, was to fund the People's Liberation Army (PLA) [4]. Beijing's move to supply Syria and other countries in the region with advanced missile capabilities prompted Washington to impose sanctions on China on the sale of computers and other areas under the auspices of the 1987 Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), which forced the Chinese to renounce their intentions to follow through with the missile sales to Syria [5]. Despite Chinese and Syrian denials, serious questions remain regarding the full extent of China's support for Syria's missile programs.

Since the early 1990s, and especially amid China's rapid economic expansion, Beijing's approach towards Damascus has since experienced a marked shift in priorities and behavior, a shift shaped largely by China's efforts to present itself as a mature and responsible actor in international affairs. China's increasingly diversified and booming economy also allow it to depend less on weapons sales, especially if such sales threaten to undermine China's political and diplomatic position in the international arena, as was the case in its bilateral relationship with the United States in the early 1990s over its dealings with Syria. Despite this shift in Beijing's behavior, China remains a major supplier of arms to countries whose intentions have come under U.S. and international scrutiny. This time, however, China is able to export arms from a position of strength to bolster its geopolitical objectives, as opposed to economic necessity.

Outside of the military realm, Beijing's influence has grown significantly in recent years, commensurate with its increasing economic power. Beijing's efforts to engage the region are also reinforced by a resounding welcome from both the state and popular sectors, as regional governments and publics are eager to see an end to what is widely viewed as a harmful U.S. hegemony in the Middle East. These sentiments prevail even in countries that count the United States as a strategic ally [6]. China's attempts to forge close and multifaceted ties with key Middle East states such as Syria, a country with modest oil reserves relative to its neighbors and a struggling economy, reflect the increasing complexity of China's foreign policy toward the region and show that Beijing's concerns extend beyond oil and markets—particularly in the case of Damascus.

Business as Usual

In accordance with Beijing's strategy toward the Middle East, Chinese Vice President Hu Jintao's January 2001 meeting with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad helped initiate a new chapter in Sino-Syrian relations that would lead to the expanded trade and closer bilateral ties both countries share today (People's Daily, January 12, 2001). Furthermore, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's visit to Beijing in July 2004 marked the first visit by a Syrian leader since the establishment of relations between both countries in 1956 (People's Daily, June 22, 2004). The Syrian leader's trip occurred against the background of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq and increasing U.S. pressure on Syria for its alleged role in facilitating elements of the Iraqi insurgency. Syria was one of the first countries in the Middle East to recognize the PRC, a milestone frequently touted by leaders in both China and Syria as a symbol of the enduring friendship shared by both countries. Since al-Assad's landmark 2004 visit to Beijing, high-level contacts between Chinese and Syrian dignitaries have become commonplace, especially contacts within the business sectors.

Reflecting the pattern of Beijing's relations elsewhere in the region, Chinese oil giants have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in Syria in recent years to modernize the country's aging oil and gas infrastructure, and have entered into joint ventures with Syrian energy firms in the areas of oil and gas exploration and oil refinement (China Daily, July 11, 2007). In a recent development, the China Petrochemical Corporation (SINOPEC) recently announced its \$2 billion purchase of Canada's Tanganyika Oil Co. Ltd., a firm with major operating interests in Syria's oil industry (Xinhua News Agency, September 28). Chinese investments in Syria also encompass the electricity, construction, telecommunications, agriculture, transport, and tourism sectors. In an effort to further boost Chinese investment in Syria, Damascus has proposed the creation of a Chinese Industrial Zone and a China Telecom Park (International Energy [Beijing], July 10, 2007). The bilateral trade volume between both countries reached \$1.87 billion in 2007, up almost 33 percent from 2006, a figure that is expected to double by 2011 (Xinhua News Agency, March 32). China has since become Syria's single largest trading partner. To demonstrate the rapid expansion of Sino-Syrian trade relations, the bilateral trade volume in 2000 was only \$174

million. Despite this impressive expansion in trade, the overall volume of Sino-Syrian trade remains relatively small compared with China's trade relations elsewhere in the region. However, the steady upward trajectory of trade relations in recent years suggests that trade ties will continue to grow. While Syria welcomes Chinese investment, a growing Syrian trade deficit has also caused some Syrians to resent the growing "Made in China" imprint on their country, especially as cheaper Chinese-made goods squeeze out their Syrian-produced counterparts in the local markets mostly as a result of preferential trade agreements and excessive undervaluing of the RMB (The National [Abu Dhabi], August 26).

Culture and Soft Power

The rapid expansion of Sino-Syrian trade relations is augmented by a bilateral effort to foster closer cultural ties between both countries that go beyond business and diplomacy. The diplomatic discourses of both countries, for instance, regularly extol the virtues of their ancient and proud histories. Having endured colonialism, occupation, and foreign interference in its domestic affairs, Syria and other developing countries in the region look to China with a sense of pride. As a developing country in its own right, China has charted an independent path toward economic development and modernization that serves as a model worthy of emulation in the developing world, a point frequently touted by Beijing. For countries such as Syria, China's experience provides a viable alternative to the Western-led economic development models championed by the United States and former European colonial powers that once occupied the Middle East, models that are often viewed as neo-colonial institutions [7]. China's case is also bolstered by the fact that it does not have a legacy of colonialism in the region.

Chinese cultural centers are also opening up across Syria, and Syrians are increasingly learning Chinese. China is also promoting Syria as a tourist destination for its citizens, a gesture that is welcomed in Damascus. Tourism revenue is a crucial source of hard currency for cash-strapped Syria. A steady stream of Chinese tourists traveling to Syria help to alleviate Syria's trade imbalance and is seen as a sign of goodwill by the Chinese toward Damascus (Xinhua News Agency, August 20, 2007).

A Testing Ground for Chinese Diplomacy

While China is eager to make its presence felt in Syria and the wider Middle East, it is careful not to overplay its hand, given that the region remains within the U.S. sphere of influence. China is aggressive when pursuing investment opportunities and access to markets, but it is less amenable to undertaking other actions that could potentially increase tensions with the United States, the dominant power in the region. China's approach to relations with staunch U.S. allies such as Egypt are emblematic of its careful balancing act in its Middle East diplomacy. In the case of Sino-Egyptian relations, China knows its limits, and is content with expanding economic and cultural ties without appearing to directly threaten the strategic relationship Egypt maintains with the United States. Beijing is well aware that it is in no position to match Washington's commitment to Egypt, not to mention contend with the fallout in U.S.-Sino relations that would result through an effort to lure Cairo away from Washington. While China is awash with cash, for instance, there are no indications that China has ever seriously considered outbidding the annual \$2 billion military and economic aid package the United States provides Egypt. Despite persistent rumblings of budding Chinese-Egyptian military contacts, Beijing instead focuses on building business and cultural ties with Cairo (China Brief, April 5, 2007). However, the dynamics at play in the Sino-Syrian interface are far more complex. Syria is entangled in a web of rival interests and regional tensions and conflicts that are sure to affect China down the line, especially as China's footprint in the Middle East grows in the economic and political spheres. Given Syria's tense relationship with the United States, Beijing's relationship with Damascus raises a host of issues for China. Among others, Washington is likely to see expanding Sino-Syrian ties as a move meant to check U.S. power in the Middle East, thus prompting a potential U.S. response in Asia or elsewhere.

Syria is also at the center of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The current status of the Golan Heights, for instance, a region in southwestern Syria that was seized and occupied by Israel during the 1967 War, and unilaterally annexed in 1981, remains a serious obstacle to an Israel-Syrian peace agreement. Further complicating matters is the presence of over 18,000 Israeli settlers living among the approximately 20,000 Syrians who remained in the region following the Israeli occupation [8]. The international community does not recognize Israel's claims over the Syrian

territory. There is also a strong consensus that any future Israeli-Syrian peace would require Israel to return the Golan Heights to Syria—an opinion openly supported by China (SANA [Damascus], June, 13).

The fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent loss of military and economic support from Moscow left Damascus severely weakened in the face of its more powerful neighbors and with few viable options to emerge out of its regional isolation, save for its relationship with Iran. As a result, Syria is eager to court China as an ally. In fact, the Baathist regime in Damascus looks to China as a bulwark against U.S. pressure against Syria, especially amid growing pressure from Washington over what it labels as Syria's links to terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and related concerns. Despite its controversial relationship with Israel, Syria's main rival in the region, China also remains a stalwart supporter of the Syrian and Arab stance when it comes to the plight of the Palestinians, as evidenced through its frequent condemnations of Israel's occupation of Palestinian land and vocal support for Palestinian self-determination.

Likewise, Syria is a vocal supporter of Beijing's "One China" principle that defines Taiwan as sovereign Chinese territory (People's Daily, July 27, 2007). A pillar of Chinese foreign policy in the Middle East and elsewhere is to shore up support for its "One China" policy in order to isolate Taiwan and undermine its relations with the United States and other countries that recognize its independence. Although virtually all of the oil consumed by Taiwan is derived from imports (approximately 900,000 bpd), 80 percent of which originate in the Middle East, the lure of Chinese investment and the prospects of forging close ties with an emerging global power such as China vastly outweigh any benefits Syria or other Middle Eastern countries may reap from recognizing Taiwan [9]. Damascus also expressed solidarity with Beijing over its handling of the riots in Lhasa, capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region, in March 2008, labeling the Tibetan uprising as an act of "sabotage" that was intended to undermine Chinese unity and stability (Xinhua News Agency, March 22). In fact, both China and Syria see eye-to-eye when it comes to resisting efforts by the United States and elements in the international community to chastise each when it comes to their respective human rights records. Beijing and Damascus see such efforts as foreign interference in their respective domestic affairs.

In addition to its role in the Arab-Israeli conflict, Syria's relationship with Iran has also left the ruling Baathist regime isolated among its Arab neighbors and Turkey. Syria is also a permanent fixture in Lebanon's complex politics. Syria is also involved in a series of disputes regarding water rights and borders with Turkey. Syria has also been criticized for its role as a gateway for insurgents traveling to Iraq to fight U.S.-led Coalition forces. Making matters worse, Syria is also home to over 1 million Iraqi refugees who fled the violence and instability in Iraq [10]. All of these issues directly involve the United States or close U.S. allies, thus forcing China to tread carefully in its dealing with Syria.

A View from Damascus

In an ideal scenario for Damascus, an emboldened China would serve to bolster Syria's position beyond the trade and diplomatic spheres. This would include closer cooperation in the defense arena to shore up Syria's antiquated military through the sale of advanced weapons platforms. Although China has a history of arms sales and transferring sensitive military technology to Syria, to include missile technology, and to other countries in the region, there are no indications that Beijing is planning to provide Syria with advanced weapons platforms that would tip the regional balance of power in the foreseeable future. Doing so would escalate regional tensions, and draw China closer to the simmering conflicts in the region. While certain elements in China may relish an opportunity to respond in kind to sales of advanced weapons systems by the United States to Taiwan and other American allies in Asia, a policy Beijing perceives as a bid to contain China, by arming opponents of the United States in the Middle East, Beijing appears to be taking a measured approach when it comes to considering major arms transfers to Syria. However, in late 2007 a series of reports surfaced alleging that China was prepared to sell both Iran and Syria its J-10 fighter jets. Ironically, the design of China's J-10s contains technology used in the development of Israel's Lavi fighter jets, technology which was sold to China after Israel ceased development of the aircraft due to financial constraints (Jerusalem Post, October 25, 2007). On a related note, Syria is actively courting Russia in a similar vein to serve as a potential partner analogous to the role Moscow played during the Cold War, especially in the area of defense cooperation. Damascus has even gone as far as to invite Russian forces to establish a naval base in Syria (Haaretz, September 12).

At a minimum, Syria hopes that China will one day use its position as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to play a more constructive role in any future negotiations between Syria and Israel over a comprehensive peace agreement, essentially serving as a counter to the United States, which supports Israel. Syria would also like to leverage its growing relationship with China in a bid to improve relations with the United States. Damascus also hopes that closer Sino-Syrian ties will also entice Moscow to increase its stake in friendlier relations with Syria.

Conclusion

Sino-Syrian relations are poised to develop even further in the years ahead. China will continue to look to Syria, in addition to the rest of the Middle East, as a source of economic potential and as an opportunity to project Beijing's influence in the region. However, as China's interests in Syria expand, Syria's continued isolation and complex geopolitics will pose a series of challenges for Chinese diplomacy that warrant closer consideration. Indeed, the Sino-Syrian relationship will force China to make hard decisions down the road. How China reacts to future regional and international crises involving Syria will also showcase China's value as a potential partner and ally for others looking to Beijing for support.

Notes

1. Xin Ma, "China's Energy Strategy in the Middle East," *Middle East Economic Survey*, Vol. LI, No. 23, June 9, 2008.
2. See Fred Halliday, "The Middle East, The Great Powers, and the Cold War" in Yezid Sayigh and Avi Shlaim, *The Cold War and the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 18.
3. See Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), "China's Missile Exports and Assistance to the Middle East," at <http://www.nti.org/db/China/mmeupos.htm> (accessed October 2008).
4. See paper presented by Kristen Gunness, "China's Military Diplomacy in an Era of Change," National Defense University (NDU) symposium on China's Global Activism: Implications for U.S. Security Interests, June 20, 2006, at <http://www.ndu.edu/inss/symposia/pacific2006/Gunnesspaper.pdf> (accessed October 2008).
5. For more details about the guidelines governing the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), see <http://www.mtcr.info/> (accessed October 2008).
6. Chris Zambelis and Brandon Gentry, "China through Arab Eyes: American Influence in the Middle East," *Parameters*, Vol. 38, Iss. No. 1, Spring 2008, pp. 60-72, at <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/parameters/08spring/zambelis.pdf> (accessed October 2008).
7. Anouar Abdel-Malek, "China's Message to the Arabs," *Al-Ahram Weekly On-line* (Cairo), 708 (16-22, September 2004).
8. Nicholas Pelham, "The Golan Waits for the Green Light," *Middle East Report Online*, July 26, 2007, at <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero072607.html> (accessed October 2008).
9. See Energy Information Administration (EIA), *Country Analysis Brief "Taiwan,"* August 2008, at <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Taiwan/Full.html> (accessed October 2008).
10. Ashraf Khalidi, Sophia Hoffman, and Victor Tanner, "Iraqi Refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic: A Field-Based Snapshot," University of Bern, Project on Internal Displacement (Brookings Institution), June 2007, p. 1, at <http://www3.brookings.edu/fp/projects/idp/200706iraq.pdf> (accessed October 2008).

 [Printer-Friendly Version](#)

 [Email this article to a friend](#)

PREVIOUS ISSUES

Volume 8, Issue 19 (October 7, 2008)

- China and Pakistan Enhance Strategic Partnership
- Beijing Tackles Lack of Transparency Amid Global Financial Crisis
- Milk Powder Scandal Exposes China's Worsening Administrative Malaise
- Media Control and the Erosion of an Accountable Party-State in China
- The Lost Generation of the 17th Chinese Communist Party Politburo
- China's Strategic Petroleum Reserves in Sino-Venezuela Relations

Volume 8, Issue 18 (September 23, 2008)

- China-Taiwan Join Hands to Exploit East China Sea Resources
- PLA's "New Leap Forward" in Information-Centric Command
- The Hu-Wen Leadership Battles "Warlords" over Economic Policies and Bureaucratic Reform
- Beijing's Perspective: Sino-U.S. Relations and the 2008 Presidential Election
- Blocking the Hormuz Strait: China's Energy Dilemma
- Is a Commercial Corporate Bond Market in China Finally Emerging?

[Complete Archives >>](#)

[home](#) | [subscribe](#) | [about us](#) | [contact us](#)

[publications](#) | [archives](#) | [resources](#) | [rss feed](#)