

Curbing China's Influence on the New Syrian Government

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Brief Analysis

Amid fears of Uyghur militancy and hopes of expanding business ties with Syria, Beijing has been rapidly adapting to the new reality in Damascus.

The collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime upended not only Syria and its neighbors, but also the state of play for a range of external powers vying for local influence. This includes China, which built a solid relationship with the regime based on providing diplomatic cover to Damascus and presenting itself as a defender of Syrian national sovereignty against foreign interference. In return, Beijing received crucial information on Chinese nationals who took part in the armed uprising against Assad that began in 2011, many of them from the Uyghur Muslim minority that has faced violent repression back home.

This mutually beneficial dynamic was thrown for a loop in December, and Beijing is now attempting to recalibrate like everyone else. A week after Assad fell, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi [stated](https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20241213-china-s-wang-says-deeply-concerned-about-syria-in-talks-with-egypt-counterpart) [\(https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20241213-china-s-wang-says-deeply-concerned-about-syria-in-talks-with-egypt-counterpart\)](https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20241213-china-s-wang-says-deeply-concerned-about-syria-in-talks-with-egypt-counterpart) that he was “deeply concerned” by the situation and called for urgent efforts to prevent “terrorist and extremist forces from taking advantage of the chaos.” Just two months later, however, Wang [dispatched](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-new-president-meets-chinese-envoy-first-time-since-assads-fall-2025-02-21/) [\(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-new-president-meets-chinese-envoy-first-time-since-assads-fall-2025-02-21/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-new-president-meets-chinese-envoy-first-time-since-assads-fall-2025-02-21/) Chinese ambassador Shi Hongwei to meet with interim Syrian president Ahmed al-Sharaa. Indeed, Chinese officials have demonstrated remarkable flexibility in a fluid situation, reflecting both Syria's regional significance to Beijing and the need for close U.S. attention to potential Chinese interference

with American interests in the Levant.

The Evolution of China's Approach to Syria

For years before Assad's fall, Beijing demonstrated its stalwart support in multiple ways. Of the [fourteen](https://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick) (<https://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick>) vetoes China has cast at the UN Security Council since 2011, [eight](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-security-council-working-methods/the-veto.php) (<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-security-council-working-methods/the-veto.php>) were pro-Assad moves jointly made with Russia. Beijing's routine diplomatic cover also included hosting Assad and his family as recently as 2023, when the two presidents signed an agreement [pledging](https://apnews.com/article/china-syria-asian-games-diplomacy-assad-xi-cce801eaa586fe5db82d28df79b0f91f) (<https://apnews.com/article/china-syria-asian-games-diplomacy-assad-xi-cce801eaa586fe5db82d28df79b0f91f>) to “jointly safeguard international fairness and justice.”

This approach was a course correction of sorts for Chinese policy in the Middle East. When the Arab Spring movement first erupted across the region in 2010, Beijing was hesitant to take any stance that could be seen as supporting popular protests. Instead, it publicly touted its long-held foreign policy principles of “non-interference” and “respect for sovereignty”—a position largely driven by its own fears of foreign-supported uprisings inside China.

Developments in Libya soon tested this approach, however. In March 2011, Beijing made the uncharacteristic decision to abstain on a vote to approve [UN Security Council Resolution 1973](https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/1973%20(2011)) ([https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/1973%20\(2011\)](https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/1973%20(2011))), which paved the way for NATO's intervention against Muammar Qadhafi's regime. In the ensuing chaos, Chinese companies lost millions, and officials scrambled to evacuate nearly 30,000 Chinese civilians, prompting some commentators back home to [criticize](https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-CJB-13527) (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-CJB-13527>) the apparent [inconsistency](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/139823/apb152_1.pdf) (https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/139823/apb152_1.pdf) in the government's approach to the region. When the Security Council introduced a [resolution](https://docs.un.org/en/S/2011/612) (<https://docs.un.org/en/S/2011/612>) six months later calling on Syria's regime to halt attacks against civilians, Beijing exercised its veto.

China's other chief interest in supporting Assad hit closer to home. In the years before Syria's civil war, [anti-government protests and ethnic clashes](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa17/027/2010/en/) (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa17/027/2010/en/>) across China's Xinjiang province left hundreds dead. In the ensuing crackdown, thousands of Uyghur Muslims—who form a plurality of Xinjiang's population—fled to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey, and other countries, where many of them [joined](https://www.economist.com/china/2025/01/09/militant-uyghurs-in-syria-threaten-the-chinese-government) (<https://www.economist.com/china/2025/01/09/militant-uyghurs-in-syria-threaten-the-chinese-government>) pan-national armed groups like the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) and the Islamic State (IS). When elements of these groups later took part in the rebellion against Assad, Uyghur foreign fighters followed suit, with thousands of them estimated to be present in Syria within a few years of the war's outbreak.

In 2015, Beijing [warned](https://www.reuters.com/article/world/china-says-fleeing-uyghurs-want-to-bring-holy-war-home-idUSKCN0PP0U5/) (<https://www.reuters.com/article/world/china-says-fleeing-uyghurs-want-to-bring-holy-war-home-idUSKCN0PP0U5/>) that these fighters were being “recruited to illegally exit” China and undergo “terrorist training” in countries like Syria and Iraq. By 2016, Chinese and Syrian officials were holding monthly [intelligence-sharing meetings](https://apnews.com/article/591f9b238c84477b87cfac68bfe169fc) (<https://apnews.com/article/591f9b238c84477b87cfac68bfe169fc>) to track these militants. In Beijing's view, Uyghur recruits were “biding their time” to return home and pose a domestic threat; indeed, many fighters [expressed](https://apnews.com/article/79d6a427b26f4eeab226571956dd256e) (<https://apnews.com/article/79d6a427b26f4eeab226571956dd256e>) a desire to use their newfound combat experience against the Chinese government.

Beijing's Interests in the New Damascus

Initially, Assad's fall heightened Beijing's fears—not only did the opposition finally unseat the regime, but it did so with Uyghur fighters in its ranks. Some of these fighters now hold positions of power in the new government, including a couple TIP commanders who have been [promoted](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-appoints-some-foreign-islamist-fighters-its-military-sources-say-2024-12-30/) (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-appoints-some-foreign-islamist-fighters-its-military-sources-say-2024-12-30/>) as officers in the new

Defense Ministry. Uyghurs are also rumored to form a key component of President Sharaa's praetorian guard alongside foreign fighters from Central Asia and the Caucasus.

To address these concerns, China has taken a twofold approach to the new government. On one hand, it has condemned the prominence of Uyghur fighters. In December, Chinese officials vowed (<https://www.newsweek.com/china-urges-stability-syria-uyghur-rebels-1999575>) to "step up counterterrorism cooperation with members of the international community to firmly strike down" these fighters; in March (http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/dbtxx_141670/czdbzjds/fcdshd/202503/t20250326_11582065.htm), Beijing demanded that Syria's new leaders "fulfill their counter-terrorism obligations" and "take decisive measures" to combat TIP.

On the other hand, China has reiterated its support for UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which calls for a Syrian-led political transition. Notably, however, its previous support (http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/hyyfy/202406/t20240626_11441535.htm) for 2254 called for countries to maintain "cooperation" with the Syrian government (read: the Assad regime), while its latest statement (http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/dbtxx_141670/czdbzjds/fcdshd/202501/t20250109_11529409.htm) in January simply urged a transition "in accordance with the spirit" of 2254.

Sharaa's Balancing Act

Since seizing Damascus, Syria's new leaders have been on a diplomatic offensive to garner international support, with more than 600 foreign engagements as of this writing. Thus far, only four of these engagements have been with China:

1. An early February meeting with a Chinese trade delegation to discuss ways of enhancing bilateral trade cooperation.
2. A late February meeting between Ambassador Shi, President Sharaa, and Foreign Minister Assad al-Shaibani.
3. A late March meeting (<https://www.sana.sy/en/?p=350634>) between Shi and Shaibani in which the ambassador "affirmed his country's respect for Syria's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence," pledged "non-interference in its internal affairs," and "stressed his support for Syria during the transitional period to successfully overcome the current situation."
4. A mid-March meeting between Syria's minister of agriculture and a delegation from the Syrian-Chinese Cooperation Association to discuss investment opportunities in the agricultural sector and infrastructure strategies to improve agricultural production.

These nascent efforts to reestablish political ties and further business interests suggest that Beijing may be adopting the same pragmatic approach it used after the United States withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021 and the Taliban retook power. Since then, China has been more active than any other country in political and economic engagement with Afghanistan, even though the Taliban was a key partner for TIP in the past. This flurry of activity is presumably rooted in the fact that threats from Afghanistan are a lot closer to home than threats from Syria or other Middle East theaters. The Taliban has repeatedly assured China and other countries that Afghanistan will not become a launchpad for external operations. Although this pledge has not been fully honored with regard to the Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISKP), which has targeted Chinese diplomats and businessmen in Afghanistan, there are no indications that TIP elements have used Afghan territory to hatch plots inside China.

Syria's new leaders originate from the group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), but their track record has been markedly less extreme than the Taliban's. They also view foreign fighter involvement in external operations as a red line; on January 14, for example, they ordered the arrest (https://www.jihadologyplus.com/p/the-new-syrian-government-draws-a?utm_source=publication-search) of an Egyptian fighter who had called for the overthrow of

President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi.

In the past month, however, TIP has released an [updated charter \(https://jihadology.net/2025/03/05/new-release-from-the-east-turkistan-islamic-party-charter-second-edition/\)](https://jihadology.net/2025/03/05/new-release-from-the-east-turkistan-islamic-party-charter-second-edition/) announcing a return to its original name, the East Turkestan Islamic Party (ETIP), signifying that it will focus solely on Xinjiang again. Toward that end, the new charter emphasizes China while deemphasizing the global jihadist issues that have animated the group in the two decades since its previous name change from ETIP to TIP. In many ways, the group appears to be influenced by the successful political jihadist model adopted by the Taliban and HTS. What all this means in practical terms is still difficult to predict, but ETIP's shift will no doubt play into Beijing's fears about Uyghur foreign fighters in Afghanistan and Syria.

Policy Implications

Although China's engagements with post-Assad Syria have been relatively small in number so far, it has shown a clear desire to improve ties despite lingering concerns about Uyghur militant elements in the new government. Washington risks making this task easier for Beijing if it continues its tepid approach to the new Syria. Historically, Russia has been a more traditional ally to Damascus, but it no longer has the economic heft that China could potentially provide, especially now that Syria is reeling from fourteen years of war and is in dire need of economic growth and reconstruction aid.

To close any potential opening that Beijing might have with Damascus, Washington should formulate a proper engagement plan that focuses on [working with \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/enough-hand-wringing-al-sharaa-better-assad\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/enough-hand-wringing-al-sharaa-better-assad) Sharaa's interim government, [easing sanctions \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/navigating-syria-sanctions-conundrum\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/navigating-syria-sanctions-conundrum), and extending the waivers granted under General License 24 to facilitate broader economic opportunities. Doing so would not only incentivize the new government to move closer to the West's orbit, but also prevent China from making potentially destabilizing inroads in an important Middle Eastern country.

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