



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

# How much will China lose from the fall of the Assad regime?



The **fall** of Bashar al-Assad is another in a series of events that undermine China's ambitions to increase its influence in the Middle East. Agile Chinese diplomacy has increased its influx into the region in recent years, building on the economic penetration of Chinese investors into major businesses in the Middle East.

However, Beijing's strategy to fill the void left by US passivity in the region in recent years is collapsing as a result of turbulent events, of which the fall of the Assad regime is only the latest in a series.

Despite the dramatic events in Syria that led to the fall of the Assad regime, China has barely reacted.

“The future and destiny of Syria should be decided by the Syrian people, and we hope that all the relevant parties will find a political solution to restore stability and order as soon as possible,” **said** the spokeswoman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing on Monday.

## An insignificant Chinese presence in Syria

Overall relations between China and Syria were not as dynamic in the previous two decades of Assad's rule, particularly after the outbreak of the conflict in 2011.

This conflict also prevented Syria from becoming one of China's important partners in the Middle East during its economic and diplomatic expansion.

Damascus only **joined** the Belt and Road Initiative in 2022, when this vehicle for the global expansion of China's economic influence was already on the wane.

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The money China invested in Assad's Syria was more in the form of aid money than in economic projects and investments. In just two years, from 2016 to 2018, China increased the volume of aid from around half a million USD to 54 million USD, a 100-fold increase.

At the same time, Chinese state-owned companies did not want to remain completely on the side-lines and continued to invest during the period of internal conflict in Syria, for example, in the energy sector, around USD 3 billion.

In addition, Chinese energy companies have occasionally acquired shares in Syria's oil and gas companies from Western companies, but not on a large scale.

## What is the main loss for China?

While the shift in Syria will not particularly affect China's direct interests in the region, even though Beijing has expressed its support for Assad's rule, the indirect consequences for China will be very noticeable. Perhaps even turning points, depending on the further development of events in Syria and its neighbourhood.

The biggest loss for Chinese interests is reflected in the decline of the regional power of its two biggest allies—Iran and Russia. After the collapse of its most powerful proxies in the region, Hamas and particularly Hezbollah, the fall of Bashar al-Assad has dealt the heaviest blow to Iran's regional presence.

As a result, China no longer has one of the two most important levers for influencing regional events, and its role in mediating the thaw between Iran and Saudi Arabia last year has almost completely diminished.

With the shift in Syria, Beijing's second diplomatic breakthrough aimed at securing a significant role in events in the Middle East has also become less significant. China's recent mediation of an intra-Palestinian agreement between Fatah and all other Palestinian factions has not led to any practical

results on the ground.

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The events in Syria have pushed the Palestinian issue even further into the background, to which the Israeli confrontation has undoubtedly contributed, first with Hamas in Gaza and then with Hezbollah in Lebanon and elsewhere.

While the fate of the Russian military presence in Syria is still **unclear**, and it had already been drastically reduced before the collapse of the Assad regime, China can also chalk up the withdrawal of its ally as its own loss.

Although China is not militarily involved in Syria, it has frequently supported Russian interests in the country and provided much-needed assistance to Moscow. China has up to ten times blocked UN Security Council resolutions targeted at the Assad regime.

Some of these, such as the 2020 agreement to continue humanitarian supplies from Turkey or the 2019 ceasefire in the opposition stronghold of Idlib, showed China's direct solidarity with Russia and its interests in Syria.

## China's diplomatic breakthrough halted

The fall of the Assad regime has therefore slowed down, if not completely halted, China's advance in the Middle East, even if the economic aspect of its influence will remain very strong.



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China will strive to be one of the key players in Syria's reconstruction and post-conflict economic recovery. But its future operations will be limited by the influence of others in the region, notably Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and especially the US when Donald Trump takes office.

Under pressure from these interests, Beijing is likely to try to establish with some future authorities in Damascus the kind of **relationship** it has with the Taliban in Afghanistan, where it is asserting itself as a key partner in reconstruction and investment. But even if such co-operation were to materialise, it would fall far short of the ambitions China had in the Middle East just a year ago.

China is "not really able to fundamentally replace the West either as an economic partner or diplomatic or military force in the region," **said** Bill Figueroa, an expert on China-Middle East relations at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands.