



China-led SCO Troops May Follow Russia to Syria

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Abstract

Russian military intervention in Syria may possibly be reinforced by additional troops from SCO member states. In the July summit of the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the two core missions were admitting India and Pakistan as full members and countering ISIS and Islamic extremism within member territories. Now that India and Pakistan have joined the SCO, the Eurasian bloc can focus on countering ISIS and other extremist bases in Syria and Iraq. With the recent Chinese Uyghur terrorist group Turkistan Islamic Party's (TIP) capture of a Syrian airbase and access to MIG fighter jets and other advanced weaponry, China especially may be compelled to deploy troops to stop TIP from launching further attacks on the Chinese homeland.

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China's Silk Road Economic Belt and Maritime Silk Road

Fu Xiaoqiang, director of Institute of Security and Arms Control from CICIR in the Ministry of State Security (CIA equivalent), warned that “terrorism has become an outstanding stumbling block for China’s development... [and] is a threat to national security.”

Indeed, China’s continual economic development is the backbone of the Communist Party’s legitimacy and survival, and as such any threat to Beijing’s access to energy supply from the Mideast, strategic minerals from Africa, and its largest export market in Europe is a red line for the regime. Since the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is the military arm of the Communist Party rather than the Chinese state, Xi Jinping will deploy the PLA to defend Chinese interests and ensure regime survival when they are threatened.

Which brings them to Syria.

ISIS in Syria threatens SCO homeland

Syria is the jihadi hotbed of not only ISIS but also other Salafist extremists that threaten to attack Eurasia and radicalize its large Sunni population.

Given that Turkey-backed Syrian rebel groups include Chinese Uyghur jihadists from TIP, an al Qaeda affiliate originally based in Pakistan’s FATA but recently found a new home in Syria, China along with Russia, India, and Egypt see Assad as a bulwark against Sunni extremist groups consisting of radicalized Muslims from their own territories, as well as a bulwark against ISIS.

Since 2012, the PLA has been increasingly alarmed by the droves of Chinese Uyghur militants joining jihadi groups and the transformation of Syria into a new Pakistani FATA from which attacks against the Chinese homeland could be launched. If Assad falls, jihadi fighters from Russia’s Chechnya, China’s Xinjiang, and India’s Kashmir will then turn their eyes toward the home front to continue jihad, supported by a new and well-resourced Syrian operating base in the heart of the Middle East.

In fact, ISIS has already made inroads in SCO territory. On 16 July Kyrgyz security forces foiled two ISIS-linked attacks targeting Kyrgyzstan’s capital and a nearby Russian airbase. Factions of Taliban and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) have also pledged loyalty to ISIS, risking further provocation of ISIS presence in “Wilayat



Khorasan”² (encompassing Afghanistan, Central Asia and Xinjiang). India’s Lt Gen K H Singh likewise expressed alarm that ISIS would gain a foothold in Kashmir³ and launch attacks from there.

Moreover, with TIP’s recent capture of a Syrian airbase and access to MIG fighter jets and other advanced weaponry, China especially may be compelled to deploy troops to stop TIP from launching further attacks on the Chinese homeland.⁴

Thus, now that the SCO has completed the first mission of admitting India and Pakistan into the Eurasia bloc, they can address the second mission of combating ISIS and terrorism.

SCO vs. ISIS in Syria

While the SCO has hitherto been an internal collective security bloc and not a collective defense alliance targeted at external threats, in face of terrorist threats increasingly emanating from outside their territory, the SCO is now projecting outward.

United by the common threat of ISIS and radical Islam destabilizing their homeland, Russia, China, and India are setting aside their strategic rivalry in the Eurasia heartland and in May announced they would conduct their first joint counter-terror exercise later in the year. In June Egypt also submitted an application to join the SCO.

The SCO already conducts joint military exercises similar to NATO, dubbed Peace Mission. Last August, SCO members conducted a large-scale counter-terror exercise to repel “foreign-backed separatism” in Inner Mongolia involving 7,000 troops⁵, and the next one will likely be on a larger scale with new members India and Pakistan.

As terrorist threats are now emerging outside of SCO borders, member states will need to follow similar US post-9/11 policy and take the fight to enemy territory—whether in AfPak, Iraq, or Syria. Indeed, in May China and Russia conducted “Joint Sea 2015” naval war games off the Syrian coast that is immediately followed by Egypt and Russia’s naval exercise near the Suez Canal.

Beijing is also increasing its military power projection to protect its trade routes and mideast energy interests, in face of ISIS affiliates attacking Chinese COSCO shipping vessels in the Suez and ISIS’s regional expansion that threatens China’s energy supply.

Concerned with regional stability and security, China is now building a new naval base in Djibouti⁶ in the Horn of Africa with a future contingent of 10,000 troops. This will substantially enlarge China’s current regional footprint under the UN banner: 1,000 troops in Lebanon, 1,000 troops in South Sudan (includes 700 combat troops), and 500 in Mali. Beijing has already deployed its elite counter terrorism force Snow Leopard to Iraq and Afghanistan and likely to Syria to combat ISIS.

² Center of Shanghai Cooperation Organization Studies (COSCOS), „Future Scenarios on the New Silk Road: Security, Strategy & the SCO“, 24 March 2015, <http://www.coscos.org.cn/a/relatedworks/2015/0324/735.html>

³ „ISIS in India: Terror Group is trying to gain foothold in PoK, Says Army“, *Huffington Post*, 7 March 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.in/2015/07/03/isis-in-india-terror_n_7722582.html

⁴ Caleb Weiss, „Turkistan Islamic Party releases photos from Syrian regime airbase“, *The Long War Journal*, 10 September 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/09/turkistan-islamic-party-releases-photos-from-captured-syrian-regime-airbase.php>

⁵ „China hosts largest ever military drill with Russia, other SCO nations“ *Russia Today*, 24 August 2014, <http://www.rt.com/news/182400-sco-military-drills-china/>

⁶ „PLA base in Djibouti to expand China’s influence at US expense“, *Want China Times*, 25 August 2015, <http://www.wantchinatimes.com/news-subclass-cnt.aspx?cid=1101&MainCatID=11&id=20150825000088>



While in Iraq the US-led anti ISIS coalition has Peshmerga and Iraqi boots on the ground, it lacks similar partners in Syria now that Turkey has blocked Syrian Kurds in the coalition. As such, the SCO can step in as much-needed infantry. There have already been discussions in China regarding sending troops⁷ to fight ISIS and in September 2014, China offered to help Iraq with airstrikes.⁸

Implications for US and Israel

Given US no longer needs Mideast energy nor would commit ground forces as it is rebalancing east to Asia, even while China is increasing its energy dependency and pivoting west on its Silk Road, China and the SCO's entry into the war against ISIS would be a welcomed step in Washington.

It may also be welcomed by Israel, as China's influence over Iran (and thus Syria) could potentially constrain Tehran's actions against Israel that threaten China's rapidly expanding investments in the region, especially with Israel's key role in the Silk Road as an alternative Suez Canal⁹ for trade between China and Europe.

And as China increases burden sharing to help maintain Mideast regional stability, becoming a "responsible stakeholder" and no longer accused by President Obama of being a "free-rider"¹⁰ regarding countering ISIS, this could be a step towards eventually forging a US-China "new type of great power relationship" in the Middle East.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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⁷ Dingding Chen, „China should send troops to fight ISIS“, *The Diplomat*, 12 September 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/09/china-should-send-troops-to-fight-isis/>

⁸ Jeremy Bender, „China Signaled it May Join Operations Against ISIS in Iraq“, *Business Insider*, 15 December 2014, <http://uk.businessinsider.com/china-airstrikes-in-iraq-2014-12?r=US&IR=T>

⁹ Emma Scott, „China's Silk Road Strategy: A Foothold in the Suez, But Looking to Israel“, *China Brief*, Vol. 14, Issue 19, 10 October 2014,

http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42943&cHash=9508d3a24834c6900c87914be9559460#.Vevpt8YViUJ

¹⁰ Bree Feng, „Obama's ‚Free Rider‘ Comment Draws Chinese Criticism“, *The New York Times*, 13 August 2014, http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/08/13/obamas-free-rider-comment-draws-chinese-criticism/?_r=1