

# The War on Syria and the Astana Peace Process: Time to Make China Fourth Guarantor State

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*In January, Russia hosted the Congress of Syrian National Dialogue in the Black Sea resort of Sochi. It has been the most representative forum thus far to discuss the conflict in Syria. Moscow invited Beijing to take part in the event as an observer. The Russian government believes that China is too important to be denied a role in the process of bringing peace to that war-torn country.*

Post-war Syria is a scene of devastation. The creation of de-escalation zones has worked well to establish a cease-fire and a pause to catch one's breath before the work of reconstruction begins. The Western powers are very unlikely to help rebuild Syria as long as Assad's government, which is backed by Russia and Iran, remains in power. Legislation that has been dubbed the "No Assistance for Assad Act" [has passed](#) the US House of Representatives and has been read twice in the Senate. The bill seeks to channel US aid exclusively to the parts of Syria outside the control of the government.

The West's [reluctance](#) to help rebuild Syria makes China a viable alternative. It [is ready to contribute](#), which is a very welcome development. Chinese businessmen [are already in Syria](#), exploring the opportunities for investment. Beijing [has announced a plan to build a \\$2 billion industrial park](#) for 150 Chinese companies. It has launched the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a multi-billion, massive, intercontinental infrastructure development project, which includes Syria as a transit partner. China is for future investments around the world and Syria could be the beneficiary of much of that. It could also be used to assist Russia, Iran, and Turkey, the Astana process guarantor states.

China [provides](#) military and other forms of assistance to Syria. It has a vested interest in the settlement of the conflict, because stability in Syria reduces the risk that mercenaries from Xinjiang will return home to mount terrorist attacks. Last year, about 5,000 ethnic Uyghurs from that province traveled to Syria to train and fight for various militant groups. The normalization of the situation would prevent the country from becoming a haven and training ground for China's [Muslim extremists](#). But no stability is achievable in Syria without improved living standards.

Beijing has been playing a low-key yet active role in the peace process, without military involvement. It has joined Russia to veto several UN proposals put forward by the West that would sanction the Syrian government.

If China became the fourth full-fledged guarantor state for the Astana process, the peace effort could expand to bring in other members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), including India and Pakistan. These states have never taken sides in Syria's conflict,

and thus could be trusted to act as impartial mediators. Iran is an observer and Turkey is a partner in the dialog. Egypt and Syria have also submitted applications to be granted observer status. Cairo [is considering](#) the possibility of sending its forces to Syria. With so many members involved in the conflict, the SCO could launch a comprehensive, international peace initiative based on the Astana process.

If some progress were made, Syria could obtain a status in the group that would be a stepping stone to full-fledged membership. The SCO could speak with one voice at the UN-brokered Geneva talks. The Shanghai Organization could solve the Syrian conflict without the West imposing its own rules of the game. Such a political breakthrough would greatly facilitate the implementation of China's BRI, with all the major actors participating in the project. The SCO's clout would grow immensely. Europe would benefit as well, if an SCO-brokered peace halted the flow of refugees.

China and Russia are also members of BRICS, another powerful group with growing prominence on the world stage. Three out of the five BRICS states – Russia, India, and China – are members of the Shanghai group. Brazil and South Africa would boost their global clout by joining in an SCO-BRICS peace effort in Syria. It's important that the Syrian government view the BRICS coalition as a legitimate player. The participation of BRICS and SCO in the settlement process would transform the international system into a more multilateral configuration. This would also be in line with the concept of Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which was adopted by the UN in 2005. Syria is the right place to demonstrate that R2P is more than an empty phrase.

In theory, there may be reservations about bringing China in to act as the fourth guarantor state in the Astana process, but the advantages clearly outweigh any doubts. It would be a good thing for Beijing to play a greater role in the political efforts.

No peace will come if Syria is not rebuilt. The post-war reconstruction is too much for anyone to take on alone. It needs to be a comprehensive, international endeavor. This is a good opportunity for the SCO and BRICS to transform themselves into real international actors tackling urgent problems. Expanding the effort to bring peace to Syria is kind of a chain reaction that could be set in motion by bringing in China. This would be a step in the right direction toward resolving the conflict.

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