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## Syrian Crackdown Prompts China to Join Russia in Appeal to Halt Violence

By Donna Abu-Nasr - Nov 9, 2011

[China](#) and Russia are calling for an end to violence in Syria after an Arab League-brokered peace accord failed to stop troops from killing protesters. They still oppose sanctions against President Bashar al-Assad.

The countries' position is motivated by a desire for stability in the region, said Dan Darling, an analyst at defense-research firm Forecast International in Newtown, Connecticut. While China is the second-largest consumer of crude oil after the U.S., Russia [sold](#) \$6.8 billion of arms to Syria between 2003 and 2010.

China and Russia vetoed a United Nations resolution last month that sought to pressure Syria's government to end violence against its citizens, while [South Africa](#), India and [Brazil](#) were among the abstainers. Their resistance goes against U.S. and European Union calls for Assad to step down, while his country and its officials face Western travel bans and asset freezes.

When it comes to Syria, the considerations of China and Russia are "practical over idealistic," Darling said. Both countries are probably wary of supporting resolutions that condemn authoritarian-style governments for fear "that would set a precedent that can come back to boomerang on them."

There is no sign that the Arab League plan to stop the violence in Syria is being implemented. Regime forces killed 71 civilians between Nov. 4 and Nov. 6, U.S. State Department spokeswoman [Victoria Nuland](#) said at a Nov. 7 briefing, citing reports by the U.S. Embassy in Damascus, the capital.

The Arab League responded by calling an emergency meeting for this weekend to discuss the bloodshed. Secretary General Nabil el-Arabi warned of a "catastrophic" situation if Syrian violence continues, [Egypt](#)'s state-run Middle Eastern News Agency reported Nov. 5.

## Tunisia Precedent

Anti-regime protests erupted in Syria in March, inspired by uprisings that toppled the leaders of Tunisia and Egypt and led to the death last month of [Libya's](#) long-time ruler, [Muammar Qaddafi](#). More than 3,500 protesters have been killed in Syria, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights said in a Nov. 8 statement.

Additionally, the New York-based Committee to [Protect Journalists](#) said in a Nov. 2 [statement](#) that it has documented the disappearance and detention of scores of journalists and bloggers since March. Among them are business journalist [Lina Ibrahim](#), freelancer Wael Abaza and blogger Hussein Ghreer, the committee said in an Oct. 31 [statement](#).

Assad has blamed the fighting on Islamic militants and foreign provocateurs. Using tanks and machine guns, his security forces have crushed demonstrators in the central governorate of Homs, and in Hama and the northwestern province of Idlib.

## Military Displays

Hamad bin Jasim Al Thani, Qatar's prime minister, said Nov. 2 that the Syrian government had accepted the [Arab League](#) initiative, which calls for the cessation of "all violence," the release of people held during protests and clearing cities and neighborhoods of "all military displays."

Russia and China supported the plan.

"China welcomes the Arab League accord as an important step to solve the situation in Syria and accelerate the political reform, which involves participation of all parties in the country," Hong Lei, a spokesman for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said at a Nov. 3 news conference.

To Russia, the Arab League agreement is a way to avoid the path Western allies took to overthrow Qaddafi in Libya. Russia abstained in a March UN vote on authorizing NATO-led military action there.

The accord "opens a real possibility of halting violence and putting the events in [Syria](#) onto the path of peaceful negotiations," Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich said Nov. 3 on Russian state television.

## 'Gravely Alarming'

Four days later, a [statement](#) on the ministry's website said "we can't help but be worried by reports of new acts of violence and casualties in recent days." The posting also expressed concern about "gravely alarming statements" from Western countries.

China called for an end to the violence in a Nov. 8 statement.

Russia and China have emphasized “not intervening in other countries’ internal affairs just as much as they obviously are keen to ensure that nobody intervenes in their affairs as well,” said Gala Riani, MENA regional manager with IHS Global Insight in [London](#), in a Nov. 3 interview.

In addition to Russia and China, Syria has been shielded from tougher international action by Lebanon, [India](#), Brazil and South Africa, which abstained from the Oct. 4 UN Security Council vote.

## **No Hidden Agenda**

South Africa has seen Security Council resolutions “abused” in the past and was concerned “that this resolution should not be part of a hidden agenda to yet again institute regime change,” the Department of International Relations said in an e-mail after the vote.

India’s Ministry of External Affairs explained its abstention with a statement saying “spotlighting and finger- pointing” was unhelpful.

Western threats against the Syrian government are “anathema to countries like Brazil which still feel weak in international society dominated by big powers,” said Matias Spektor, an international relations professor at [Rio de Janeiro](#)’s Getulio Vargas Foundation.

For China, it’s about stability in the [Middle East](#), said Kerry Brown, head of the Asia program at Chatham House in London. In 2010, [Saudi Arabia](#) was China’s largest supplier at 893,000 barrels a day, according to an [analysis](#) by the U.S. Energy Information Administration. It imported 426,000 barrels a day from [Iran](#) and 317,000 from Oman.

### [Russia](#) Arms

“The bottom line is that it’s got a hungry economy and they just want stability everywhere so they can get access to the markets and access to these energy sources,” Brown said in a Nov. 4 interview.

For Russia, the interest in Syria stems at least in part from the military. Russia had arms transfer agreements with Syria worth \$4.7 billion between 2007 and 2010, according to a September report by the [Congressional Research Service](#). The comparable figure for 2003-2006 was \$2.1 billion.

Syria has allowed Russia to maintain a naval base on its coast, giving Moscow a presence in the Mediterranean Sea. The port of Tartous is the only Russian base outside the former Soviet republics.

A 2007 contract to sell advanced Russian anti-ship missiles to Syria is being implemented, [Ria Novosti](#) quoted Mikhail Dmitriyev, head of Russia's Federal Service for Military- Technical Cooperation, as saying Nov. 2.

China's arms transfer agreements with Syria are a fraction of Russia's, totaling \$300 million from 2007 to 2010, according to the CRS report.

While Chinese and Russian non-interference may reassure Assad, that could change if violence escalates or "other issues in global negotiations among the great powers come up," said [Paul Salem](#), director of the [Carnegie Middle East Center](#) in [Beirut](#). "China and Russia's position isn't black and white. This is one chip in the global bargaining game."

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