

Syria crisis shows China's low-key global diplomacy



NEWS ANALYSIS

By **ESTHER TEO**
CHINA CORRESPONDENT
IN BEIJING

CHINA'S recent handling of the crisis in Syria highlights a conservative approach to global diplomacy, say analysts, compared to its growing assertiveness in territorial disputes and regional issues closer to home.

As the prospect of United States-led military strikes in Syria heightened in recent months, Chinese diplomats stuck to their usual rhetoric of supporting a political solution in the 2½-year civil war and opposed any foreign intervention.

Beijing said it did not support Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and vetoed UN resolutions only if it thought they would escalate the crisis.

Overall, it remained on the sidelines, neither offering solutions of its own nor mounting fierce resistance to US-led diplomacy on the Syria issue.

It was Russia that eventually stepped up to the plate, upstaging even the US with its plan to rid Syria of all its chemical weapons by the middle of next year. This option averted the threat of US military action and received widespread support.

Analysts cite several reasons for China's low-key approach. For one, the Middle East is relatively unfamiliar territory to the Chinese.

Beijing's weak presence and influence there means it is unable to do anything substantial to help resolve the Syrian crisis, said Professor Huang Jing of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

Singapore-based analyst Li Mingjiang suggested that if it had been China, rather than Russia, that proposed to Syria to hand over its chemical weapons, the initiative would not have got the same level of support because Beijing lacks Moscow's close ties with Damascus.

"The plan would not have been taken seriously by the Syrian government and other global players," he added.

Other analysts see China's reticence as strategic calculation.

China politics expert Steve Tsang of the University of Nottingham said Beijing did not take on a bigger role because it was not in its interest.

"China will prefer to take the back seat and let the Russians take on the US and Europe... This is smart diplo-

macy," Prof Tsang added.

Ultimately, experts say, China's foreign policy still reflects more continuity than new thinking. Beijing, for instance, holds firm to its cherished policies of non-interference, respect for sovereignty and non-aggression as these are in its interests as well.

Analysts also see Chinese President Xi Jinping as a "practical man" who picks and chooses his battles carefully. Or put simply, Beijing does not regard Syria as a vital interest.

Dr Li does not think there will be any drastic change to China's traditional approach to global security in the coming decade.

"On issues like Taiwan... human rights and democracy, China remains resolutely opposed to foreign involvement. This makes it very difficult for China to change its posturing on international intervention," he added.

There have been exceptions to this traditional view, however, when the issues involve China's core interests, such as the maritime territorial disputes with its neighbours in the East and South China Seas.

On such issues, Beijing will not hesitate to flex its muscles and President Xi has been "more aggressive" than his predecessor, Prof Huang noted.

"If China has the capabilities and resources, Mr Xi will not hesitate to push. But if its capabilities are limited, then he will be conservative, maximising gains and minimising costs instead," he said.

Still, some say China, the world's second-largest economy, can no longer fly under the radar and that its inaction on difficult foreign policy issues could dent its image.

Professor James Tang, dean of the Singapore Management University's School of Social Sciences, said: "Despite its growing economic and political clout, China hasn't acquired the kind of global standing and the diplomatic, political and economic power that would allow it to step up globally to play the role that Russia is able to do."

But he added it would be a "slow and gradual process" before China can step into its global power role.

Sydney-based analyst Kerry Brown said in a BBC commentary this week that Beijing's global economic reach means its political and diplomatic power is becoming one of the most potent new forces in world affairs.

It might not be Syria, but sooner or later, even on issues beyond its sphere of influence, it will have to step up, or be forced to do so, he said.

✉ esthert@sph.com.sg