



Institute for Islamic  
Strategic Affairs

# IISA

## Annual Strategic Brief 2015

# Resurgence of Russia and China

## **Ibn-Khaldun Paper Series**

**Executive Summary  
April 2015**

# **IISA Annual Strategic Brief for the Resurgence of Russia and China Programme**

## **Introduction**

The Islamic world has been centre stage of global power politics since the turn of the millennium, with the US led global war on terror taking priority in the international security agenda and the Arab Spring promising and then disappointing hopes for a new era of Arab democracy. At the same time, Russia and China have been rising, slowly but steadily bringing their own combined hard and soft power to the global arena.

Russia has used the past decade to boost its international standing, reversing the decline and internal chaos of the 1990s and begun to reject the post cold-war liberal international order. The interventions in Georgia and more recently the Ukraine, combined with Russia's efforts for closer engagement within Central Asia have demonstrated Russian intentions to impose itself upon its near abroad.

China's military rise and manoeuvre in the Asia-Pacific and its resource hungry drive into Africa are also indicative of attempts to modify the existing international order. The West's restrictive response to the Islamic world for decades, has contributed, in part, to this emerging schism, that looks set to drastically change the global security agenda. The forces operating within the Islamic world itself have been largely overlooked. History does not favour those who do not pay attention to it and it almost certainly does not forgive those who do not learn from it. This is the main reason the Institute for Islamic Strategic Affairs (IISA) started its programme on 'Resurgence of Russia & China; Implications on the greater Mid-East and wider Islamic world.' This is the executive summary of our annual strategic brief that summarises the major trends and dynamics pertaining to the resurgence of Russia and China and how they have particularly impacted on the Islamic world both regionally and globally in 2014.

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## **Chapter 1: The destabilisation of Eastern Europe: Russia's historical perception of insecurity and its repercussions for modern Europe**

Chapter 1 addresses the historical reasons behind Russian policies in Ukraine and Eastern Europe. Russia has historically been fearful of attack due to a lack of geographical barriers to defend against invasion. This helped to shape Russian expansion for centuries and has influenced Russian policy into the modern world. In February 2014, Ukrainian activists removed President Yanokovic from power, hoping to move towards greater integration with the EU. Russia feared it was shifting away from Russia's sphere of influence and that Ukraine would become a future NATO member state on its border. In response, Russia intervened to annex the Crimea.

To justify its intervention, Russia claimed to be protecting Russian speakers outside of Russian borders, a tactic used throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century to justify taking territory without consent of the affected state. After the Crimean annexation, Russia began to support the pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine, providing heavy weaponry and soldiers which has given the separatists a distinct advantage against the Ukrainian forces, enabling them to carve out a significant territory of Eastern Ukraine.

Russia has used a combination of tactics to confuse opponents. This is called Maskirovka, a Russian term for a holistic tactic of denial and deception. This has taken the form using Russian soldiers without clear identification to secure territory in the Crimea and using the 'troll

army' to push pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda online.

The West has reacted by providing training to Ukrainian forces and economic assistance to Kiev, although they have yet to provide military hardware. They have also begun moving military forces into Eastern European NATO member states, especially in the Baltic region, in an effort to reassure them and deter any Russian interventions.

The conflict in Ukraine is becoming increasingly intractable, with diplomatic solutions failing to solve the situation. The majority of ceasefires have been used to improve the strategic position of each side, with the Russian capture of Debaltseve during a ceasefire a clear example of this. Even if a ceasefire is successful, the conflict looks likely to become frozen, allowing Russia to create a buffer zone in Eastern Ukraine. The longer the conflict continues and the weaker that Putin becomes, the more likely he will be to take further risks. The conflict also threatens to grow and draw in more foreign fighters, with Chechens already fighting on both sides of the war in Ukraine. Their presence increases the possibility that Jihadist fighters from Chechnya and Syria will move into Europe in the long run. Europe stands at a cross roads; the way it deals with the Ukraine crisis is likely to shape the whole nature of Europe in the years to come.

## **Chapter 2: 'The Cold war is dead, long live the cold war': Western response to the Rise of Russia and China in perspective**

Chapter 2 focuses on western responses to the rise of Russia and China. Western policies towards the Islamic world since

the end of the Cold War have helped to open up the opportunity for Russia and especially China to move further onto the global stage. This has been particularly true for China's growing influence in the Asia Pacific and Africa, and Russia's in the Middle East, Caucasus and Eastern Europe. However, in retrospect, western responses to Chinese and Russian advances have at best been slow and at worse counterproductive. This has assisted Russian and Chinese attempts to 'divide and rule'. Beijing, for instance, after realising that Brussels does not have any central authority and member states often take independent policies, consequently grew closer to the German block whilst keeping the UK-French block at bay and invests (diplomatically and economically) in Eastern Europe. Moscow has established similar patterns, able to divide European responses to its actions in the Ukraine.

Under such condition, economics plays a pivotal role for both countries' relationship with the West. China is still enjoying an increasing economic advantage with the West, in spite of the global financial crises which began in 2008. Whereas the European Union is China's biggest trading partner and China is the EU's second biggest trading partner, the EU has a huge trade deficit with China of around US\$ 120 Billion. The adoption of the 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation and the agreement on Free Trade will deepen the economic relationship further, helping to overcome disputes and disagreements. With the US, China also has a trade surplus of over US\$ 300 Billion. However, Russia's position is not as promising as China's, facing a significant economic downturn and growing economic pressure from the West. The West's growing perception of Russia as financially unstable and the punitive economic measures following the annexation of

Crimea have played an important role in the economic downturn. The US itself has stopped the Generalized System of Preferences for Russia, although its impact is more political than economic. Responding to this decline in the Russia – West relationship, China is likely to take a more cautious attitude, protecting its own interests with the West.

### **Chapter 3: Rise of an Empire? The Internal Dynamics of China**

In chapter 3, the discussion is aimed at the internal dynamics and emerging trends of China in 2014. Xi Jinping's emergence as the fifth generation of leadership has received a mixed reaction. In spite of a relatively short period in the highest position of power, Xi is generally viewed positively, especially by internal stakeholders. The rejuvenation spirit of the 'Chinese Dream', combined with aggressive anti-corruption initiative has become the flagship of the regime. Nevertheless, Xi lacks a major political reform agenda and has imposed even more limitations on civil liberties. Thus, aside from his charisma as a new leader of China with a reform agenda, we should not expect fundamental change within China. However it is still important to observe Xi's whole first term ending in 2018, before conclusions can be made.

The main emphasise of Xi's reform agenda has been its anti-graft crusade, understandable, given the leadership's transition was overshadowed by a high profile political crisis, Bo Xilai's, and the increasingly sluggish economy. Indeed, the pursuit of 'flies and tigers' seems to be bringing good results, by prosecuting several high-profile figures. This process is expected to increase the regime's legitimacy, particularly among citizens, making it possible to advance further

reform in other areas. It is also a significant change to the Chinese Communist Party's traditional doctrine as power is becoming increasingly centralised around Xi. Economic and legal reforms are also being undertaken, but on a more limited scale. All of these reforms aim to transform China into a developed country in the next decades. As a consequence, China's foreign policy is growing assertive, yet this creates a paradox for the leadership. On one hand, it would like to protect its sovereignty and interests; yet on the other hand, it would like to build strategic partnerships that benefit its internal development. However, interference in other nations' affairs cuts against China's established non-interference doctrine, which has been a fundamental principle of China's foreign policy, reflecting neurosis about ensuring freedom of action to quell domestic challenges to its power. This paradox certainly creates a gap between what China and other countries perceive, resulting in tensions.

#### **Chapter 4: The revival of gunboat diplomacy? China's assertive push in the South China Sea and its soft-power ambitions in the Asia Pacific**

Chapter 4 discusses China's policy in the South and East China Seas. The year 2014 has seen China move beyond a policy, ostensibly of non-intervention, to one where it has sought to use its growing hard power in an assertive push to claim significant areas of maritime territory and its resources. The South China Sea is significant to China because of its economic importance, the way it fits into China's national identity and also because of its strategic importance for China's security. It has therefore sought to expand

its sphere of influence in the region by asserting de facto control, yet without allowing this to escalate into armed conflict. This strategy has been called 'para-gunboat diplomacy' and involves the combined use of the Chinese coast guard, civilian vessels and other non-state groups to control maritime territory. This has been achieved by controlling maritime territory, building artificial islands and populating existing islands with Chinese citizens, allowing greater military presence and a greater semblance of legitimacy though the presence of civilians.

Such para-gunboat diplomacy has elicited various responses from countries in the region. The increased regional defence spending is an effort to create a credible deterrence against China, including the growth of indigenous defence industries. Many countries are also resorting to similar tactics in order to counter China, namely through strengthening and utilising their coast guards as paramilitary enforcers and civilians to settle islands in the Sea. The Philippines and Vietnam have also resorted to legal measures to counter China by filing arbitration cases at the UN arbitral court in The Hague, despite China's refusal to cooperate. The USA has also been attempting to increase its regional presence as part of its 'pivot' to the Asia Pacific, both through political and socio-economic engagements. In many ways however, the USA has been far behind China. In spite of being relatively removed from the tension, Indonesia, with the new regime under Joko Widodo, is likely to play a more assertive regional role in the future. It has already started aggressively tacking illegal fishing, which could place it into conflict with China in 2015. Japan, which has historically been a rival to China, has shown a more assertive approach too and is in the process of military 'normalisation' under Prime Minister Abe, which will allow it to more

easily defend its own and allies interests. It is therefore becoming a major balancing force, with many countries in the region seeking to improve bilateral relations.

The latter part of 2014 however saw efforts to de-escalate the regional tensions. China has been seeking rapprochement with Japan over their territorial dispute. China's major efforts have however centred on building soft power. This has taken the form of the 'Asia-Pacific dream', a Chinese vision of Asian prosperity based around China's centrality to the region's economy. China has begun to fulfil this with the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the establishment of the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP), a rival to the US led TPP free trade agreement. In spite of the new soft power focus, China continues to alter the status quo in the South China Sea by improving its strategic position. China's efforts to utilise soft power are however unlikely to be successful as long as it continues to use its hard power to in the region. China's para-gunboat diplomacy tactics are however going to continue to risk small scale conflict between state and non-state actors.

## **Chapter 5: Syria and beyond - Russia & China in the MENA region**

The fourth chapter is about Russia and China's involvement in the MENA region. Following the US retreat, Russia shifted its position to become a central player in the region as can be clearly seen from its relationships, for example, with Syria, Turkey, Egypt and Israel-Palestine. Despite claiming to be neutral in the Syrian conflict, Moscow has firmly stood beside Assad. Russia's repeated veto on military intervention against the Assad

regime and its central role in dismantling chemical weapons prove the close tie between Moscow and Damascus. Interestingly, Russia successfully maintains its relationship with neighbouring countries which fervently opposes Assad's regime. Turkey and Jordan are two clear examples. While the US and the EU are concerned by the 'democratic coup' in Egypt, Russia accelerated its relationship with Egypt, a reminder of the days of Nasser. Moscow provided assistance to Maliki of Iraq, while criticising the West's double standard on the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria. Yet, the IS has shown its enmity to Putin's regime, citing the case of Chechnya and the Caucasus. There is potential for Russia to play a greater role in mediating the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. Although not yet materialised, in the future negotiations may be influenced by Russia due to its increasingly close relationship with both sides.

In the context of China, its past inactivity in the MENA region has been replaced by a more intense cooperation, particularly in economic areas, especially energy as 60% of China's oil supplies come from the region. China has become not only an extremely valuable trade partner, but also a model of economic growth without political liberalisation. Clinging to the principle of non-intervention, China has been engaging with both sides in Syrian, Egyptian and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, mainly maintaining economic exchange.

## **Chapter 6: Russia and China in South Asia and the US Afghan withdrawal**

Chapter 5 deals with Russia and China in South Asia, especially related to the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Drawing

knowledge from the IISA's strategic brief, Ibn-Khaldun Paper on the US Afghan withdrawal analysis, China's interest in South Asia and Afghanistan mainly relates to its Xinjiang region. For China the Xinjiang region has huge natural resources, it is increasingly strategically important to Central Asia and to the routes of the new Silk Roads, and is also experiencing significant social unrest. China has officially welcomed the Bilateral Strategic Agreement (BSA) that will allow a chunk of US and NATO Special Forces and training forces to remain in Afghanistan. China fears that instability in Afghanistan may spread to Xinjiang. China, however, has other strategic priorities in South Asia; especially a cautious concern about the rise of India. China maintains its close relationship with Pakistan because of its strategic position, its new port of Gawadar which is part of the new Maritime Silk Road project, its closer relations with the Taliban and its potential to assist fighting against the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) separatist rebels.

Russian interests in South Asia are intertwined with its key strategic interests in Central Asia, which converge with those of India, China and Iran. The key Russian interest remains in minimising or completely stopping any spill over from Afghanistan into Central Asian states, which remain key to its Eurasian Union and other ambitions. It means also facilitating US/NATO led efforts in Afghanistan to contain first Al-Qaeda and then the Taliban. Besides that, Russia is increasingly concerned about US - Iranian rapprochement given the possibility of a nuclear deal. Yet as both countries face western sanctions, a US-Iranian nuclear deal still in its infancy and Iranian concerns of yet another US intervention in Iraq; Russia and Iran's interests are increasingly converging, especially increasing economic cooperation, in

breach of multilateral sanctions on Iran. Last but not least; Sino-Russian relations remain strong but Russia is keeping its options open and has traditionally had good strategic and military relations with India. Russia will therefore engage further with South Asia and try to use it to diversify its economic relations to prevent overwhelming dependency upon China; whether this can succeed because of South Asia's economic differences, is yet to be seen.

## **Chapter 7: Russia and China in Central Asia: emerging trends**

The sixth chapter focuses upon Russia and China in Central Asia. Russia has made efforts to enhance its influence through offering fast-track citizenship to Russian speakers anywhere within the former Soviet Union, a policy which sparked significant controversy. Fear of Russian attempts to use force against Central Asian countries, although abating, are still present in light of the Crimean annexation. The likelihood is that many Central Asian countries will look to move away from Russia, more towards China and the West. The cancellation of the South Stream pipeline between Russia and Europe is likely to benefit Central Asian gas suppliers in the future as they won't be reliant on Russian infrastructure for transportation. The creation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) has also begun this year, but it has failed to achieve many of its intended purposes. With the power imbalance so far in Russia's favour, Russia's deteriorating economic position and failure to bring the Ukraine into it, the EEU looks unlikely to create significant economic or political changes.

The separation between religion and the state in Central Asia has also become an important issue. It relates both to the

region's Soviet past and also to the present with the rise of IS. The IS could use the region to recruit fighters, for transportation and other purposes. The way that the people of Central Asia view their state, Islam and IS will be key to determining if it become a major recruiting ground for IS and if instability in the Middle East will spread north. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has become a major feature of security in Central Asia and has been used by China, Russia and other Central Asian Countries to combat the three forces of terrorism, separatism and extremism. China has great interest in this initiative due to Uighur ETIM. In terms of economy, both Russia and China have been actively engaging with Central Asia countries for over a decade. Nevertheless, China's Silk Road project is going to have a huge impact on the region. Russian economic issues are also likely to cause a shift in policy in Central Asia which has become so dependent upon remittances from Russian based expats, yet as these dry up, they will have to seek other investment. This is going to affect Russia's sphere of influence and mean that China is likely to gain whilst Russia loses out.

## **Chapter 8: Global economics and the Sino-Russian relationship**

The final chapter analyses the impact of economics on the Sino-Russian relationship and its subsequent impact on global geopolitics. It finds that Russia has been hit by a perfect storm of structural economic weaknesses, Western sanctions and a collapse in global oil prices. The sanctions have made many Western companies wary of investing in Russia because of its instability. The oil price collapse has been caused by a combination of reduced global demand and increased supply. The drop in demand has come

mainly from Asia and oil production has been boosted by the growing capacity of shale oil in the USA.

These conditions have created a prisoner's dilemma for oil producing countries. If they individually reduce their production then it will do little to improve their finances and will benefit other producers. Saudi Arabia's control of global oil supply has given it the power to maintain output by preventing an OPEC consensus, thus reducing global prices and hitting Russia and Iran's finances. Saudi Arabia has done this partly to make US Shale oil less competitive, but mainly to punish Russia's support for the regimes in Syrian and Iran, and also to punish Iran itself. As both of these governments require high oil prices to maintain government spending, they were both heavily hit by this price collapse. In an effort to maintain revenues, Russia has increased oil production to a post Soviet Union high of 10.667 million barrels a day in December 2014, but this is helping to push oil prices lower. The economic problems within Russia will undoubtedly have an impact on internal stability, with Putin facing potential coups, and a crackdown on political dissent likely to occur. Low oil prices look to be a feature of the next few years.

The economic issues facing Russia have led to a deepening of the economic links with China. The recent bilateral energy deals mean that China will likely pay below market price for energy from Russia for years to come. Capital flight has also provided opportunities for Chinese investors to buy major assets and the collapse in the value of the Ruble in December 2014 meant that China has had to act as the lender of last resort for Russia with a currency swap helping to stem the currency collapse. These combined issues are fuelling Russia's increasingly asymmetric dependency upon China which



is likely to become more pronounced in the next few years. Russia has tried to overcome this by looking for further trade and investment in North Asia, including investing in North Korea and looking to supply energy to the Korean peninsula and Japan. This may impact upon the politics of North Asia, but is not significantly going to improve Russia's economic position.

There have recently been indications from some European countries, namely Germany and France, that they may loosen the sanctions on Russia as it appears to be de-escalating the Ukraine conflict, this may signal an easing of Russia's isolation. It is however premature to assume this and so in the long term it seems likely that the isolation is going to continue to be pronounced.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the resurgence of Russia and China on to a global stage has been a slow but a steady process in the past twenty years. The Islamic world also played a huge part in establishing the new Sino-Russian role on the global stage, both creating the space for them to emerge, and in the case of oil prices, helping to challenge Russia's basis of strength. While Russia and China's resurgence has been a steady upward progress with minor reversals and challenges, the general trajectory in the Islamic world has been downwards. Almost every region in the Muslim world has serious socio-political, economic and security issues. Moreover,

the lack of strategic responses in the West and its entanglement with yet another 'long war' in the Islamic world, leave both Russia and China not just a 'window' of opportunity but a 'door' of opportunities to further their strategic interests across the Islamic world.

The year 2014 has accelerated this resurgence. Russia's biggest impact has been that it has created the space for China to begin to actively shape the international system, with both countries taking advantage of opportunities when they have arisen. With the USA distracted by Russia's actions in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, China has seized the opportunity and has begun remodelling the economic, security and political systems of Asia. Russian economic weaknesses have also given China an advantageous strategic and economic position vis-a-vis Russia. This provides China the opportunity to expand its sphere of influence into Central Asia, with Russia having to take a more backseat role in the alliance of convenience. Russia will continue to be rocked by economic issues, severely curtailing its ability to influence the international arena but seeking to diversify economically. The year 2015 will see a further increase of anarchy and chaos in key regions of the Islamic world, which will further complicate the Western role and involvement. China will attempt to build on this to continue its resurgence and begin to actively influence the global system.

## About the Authors:

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## **About Us**

**IISA** is a think-tank and an intellectual forum for addressing the current and future dynamics of the Islamic-world and its interaction with Western civilisation. Based in London, IISA will create trans-Islamic and global reach. IISA seeks to establish a platform where Islamic-world's dynamics, trends, issue, problems or crises are analysed within the Islamic-world and by working on local models and realities and not against any external standards or perceptions. We will be one of the leading think-tank on the Islamic-world and its role in the contemporary global system. In a short span of time we have attracted great academic support and a reputation for both open and track-II dialogues. IISA is the only think tank initiative that goes beyond national and regional inclinations and addresses strategic and socio-political issues/crises of the Islamic-world in its totality. For more information i.e. our mission statement, current programmes and our academic and regional expertise please visit the following links:

**Website:** [www.iisa.org.uk](http://www.iisa.org.uk)  
**Blog:** <http://iisablog.org/>  
**Twitter:** [https://twitter.com/IISA\\_org](https://twitter.com/IISA_org)  
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## **About 'Resurgence of Russia and China programme':**

As the US starts to scale down its 'heavy footprint' from the Islamic-world; the resurgence of new powers becomes crucial to evaluate. The rise of today's regional and tomorrow's global power and their internal and external policies will determine future discourses. Among the rising economies and military powers; Russia and China stand out the most.

Russia has become a key global actor in the aftermath of Syrian revolution. It is the first time since the end of the cold war that Russia is not only directly involved in managing global affairs but has even managed to dictate them in Syria as well as in Georgia Taking further advantage from its new role of an emerging global power; Russia is now seeking new relations in different regions of the Islamic-world i.e. Middle East (Egypt, Syria), Central and South Asia etc.

Chinese foreign policy in the different regions of the Islamic-world can be seen as a combination of foreign policy approaches. The over-riding themes of Chinese foreign policy however remains limited to the projection of ‘soft power’ mixed with economic interaction and developmental strategies. This paradigm may not be sustainable in the near-future as the global system seems to shift towards multi-polarity. Chinese inter-relations with the US hard power and their economic interdependency may empower its soft foreign policy approaches. If however, these trends continue to change as the current geo-strategic trends demonstrate, Chinese foreign policy may have to radically change in terms of projecting its economic and military power in order to cater for its huge energy demands, resources and raw material etc.

Furthermore; although China and Russia may have different geopolitical interests; they have also found common grounds and convergences of interests on different global issues. As the US tries to ‘rebalance’ Asia Pacific and Eastern Europe: the convergences of interests are likely to steadily grow in the near to mid-term future.

Finally; as the internal unrest grows in many parts of the Islamic-world; the role of emerging power such as China and Russia will be hugely important to monitor.

### **Key Features of the programme:**

- Analysis of China and Russia’s historic development in the last few decades
- Analysis of contemporary socio-political trends within China and Russia
- Analysis and evaluation of current Chinese and Russian foreign policy models and paradigms, particularly in the regions of the Islamic-world
- Exploration and evaluation of China and Russia’s military and defence strategies
- Exploration and evaluation of Chinese cyber-warfare capabilities
- Analysis of fragility or sustainability of western power and Pax-Americana
- Analysis of the inter-relation of the emerging powers i.e. India, Brazil, Vietnam, Indonesia, Myanmar etc. with China and Russia
- Analysis of new blocs particularly Shanghai cooperation organisation (SCO) or ASEAN and Chinese influence and Russian led ‘custom’ and ‘trade’ Unions
- Establishment and anticipation of different Chinese and Russian foreign policy models, using ‘futurology’ studies and by the above mentioned analyses of current and emerging trends etc.