

# FEATURE

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## China and Syria announce 'strategic partnership' after its leaders met in Beijing

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September 23, 2023 8:17 AM ET

Heard on [Weekend Edition Saturday](#)

<https://www.npr.org/2023/09/23/1201306872/china-and-syria-announce-strategic-partnership-after-its-leaders-met-in-beijing>

Syria's president visited China for the first time in nearly 20 years as he looks to end his international isolation and as Beijing seeks to deepen its influence in the Middle East.

**SCOTT SIMON, HOST:**

China's hosting the Asian Games that began this weekend and, in addition to athletes, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. He's attending the opening games in China and met with Xi Jinping to try to deepen ties between their two countries. NPR's Aya Batrawy joins us now from Dubai. Aya, thanks so much for being with us.

**AYA BATRAWY, BYLINE:** Thanks, Scott.

**SIMON:** So why this visit now? First time that Bashar al-Assad has been there in 20 years.

**BATRAWY:** Yeah, I mean, Bashar al-Assad is definitely having a moment. I mean, this was a man who was a global pariah. And for years, the United States and Saudi Arabia and other countries were trying to topple his regime. But he managed to crush that rebellion and the popular uprising against his government with bombs and the full force of his military and security apparatus.

The war killed hundreds of thousands of people. And now millions of people, of Syrians, remain displaced. And for all of that, he was isolated by much of the world.

But fast-forward to 2023 - he's in China with his wife. They are arriving to a red carpet,

cheering Chinese kids. Bouquets of flowers are being handed to him.

And this whole rehabilitation got a big boost in May when Syria rejoined the Arab League because, really, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries are arguing that the status quo - the state of Syria is untenable for the region.

And China welcomed this. And they said, you know, they support Arab solidarity. And throughout this war, China's been a trade partner. Russia and China have also blocked resolutions at the U.N. Security Council that would hold his government accountable.

**SIMON:** Aya, what do Syria and China want out of a relationship?

**BATRAWY:** China wants a bigger role in the Middle East beyond just trade and business ties, and we saw that earlier this year when they managed to mediate the restoration of ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia. That was a big deal.

But they're also leading a group of countries known as BRICS with Brazil and Russia and others, and they see that as a counterweight to the U.S.-led Group of Seven. BRICS just invited four countries from the Middle East to join them. And in this region - look. For many, traditionally, the U.S. has been the economic and military power on the ground.

And for al-Assad, he's not even in control of all of Syria's territory still, and the economy is on its knees. It is so bad there in Syria that people took to the streets again in recent weeks openly shouting against his government. So Assad needs money. He needs investments.

I spoke with Lina Khatib. She's the director of London's SOAS Middle East Institute, and she says it's really unlikely China's going to be investing billions like the West could to rebuild Syria. But even without that, she says, Assad is still getting something out of this visit.

**LINA KHATIB:** China is simply not a replacement for Western engagement in Syria. Assad, deep down, knows that, but he's trying to convey this message of defiance to the West. Assad is also trying to send a message domestically in Syria about his own legitimacy.

**SIMON:** Aya, what are the two sides getting out of this visit this weekend? Real deals or just the appearance of them?

**BATRAWY:** Well, China declared what they call a, quote, unquote, "strategic partnership" with Syria after the leaders met - Xi Jinping and Bashar al-Assad. They've been promising deeper economic cooperation. You know, Syria is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to strengthen China's economic might through Asia and Africa.

But there are optics to this. I mean, China's press said the two leaders discussed their shared opposition to foreign interference and hegemony. That is a clear swipe at the United States, which has troops in northeast Syria and is expanding its military presence in Asia to counter China. So broadly, this visit is a snub to the United States. It chips away at U.S. and European policy of isolating Assad internationally.

**SIMON:** NPR's Aya Batrawy in Dubai, thanks so much for being with us.

**BATRAWY:** Thank you.