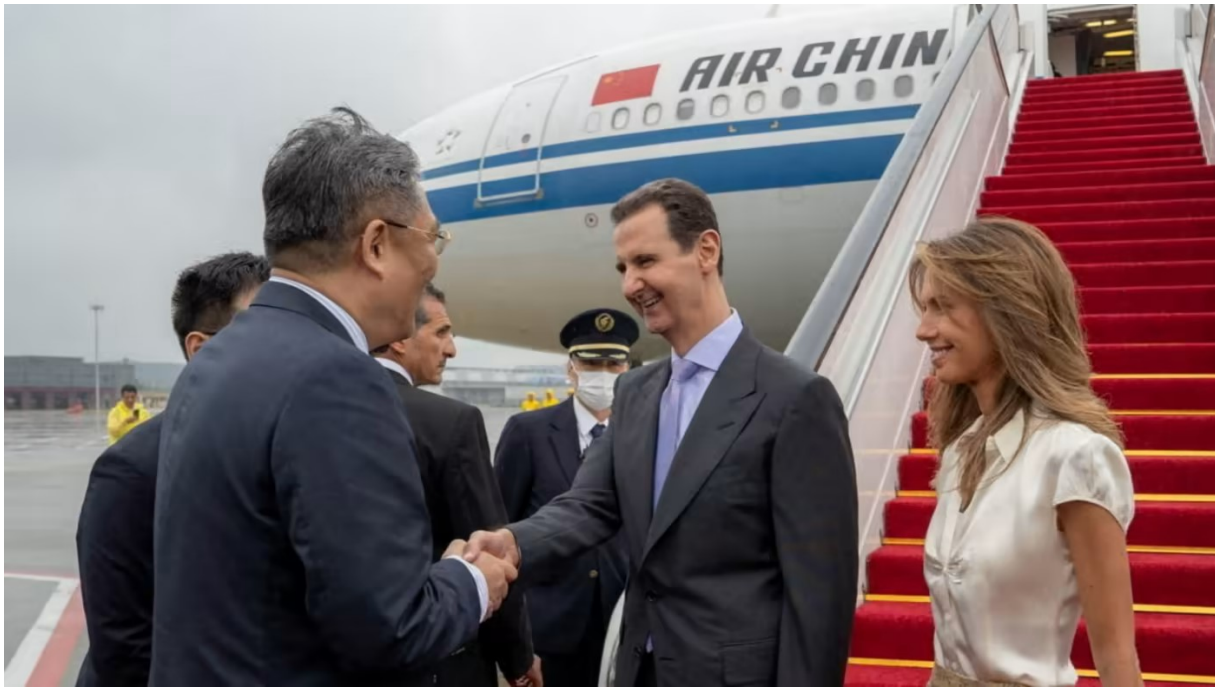


**Chinese politics & policy**

## China welcomes Syrian president Bashar al-Assad for summit

First visit since start of civil war as Beijing expands its influence in Middle East



Syria's president Bashar al-Assad, centre, and his wife Asma arrive in Hangzhou, China, on Thursday © Syrian Presidency/Handout /Reuters

**Andrew England** in London and **Joe Leahy** in Beijing 5 HOURS AGO

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Syrian president Bashar al-Assad arrived in China on Thursday for a bilateral summit in his first visit since a civil war erupted in his country 12 years ago.

Assad's trip comes as Beijing is seeking to increase its diplomatic influence in the Middle East and as Damascus is being tentatively welcomed back into the fold by regional powers that once backed the Syrian opposition.

His regime has regained control of about two-thirds of the country with the military backing of Russia and Iran, but Assad is still treated as a pariah in the west and he rarely travels abroad.

There has long been speculation that [Syria](#) would seek Beijing's support for the multibillion-dollar task of reconstructing the war-devastated country. The topic is expected to be raised when Assad meets Chinese president Xi Jinping.

But [China](#) has been reluctant to invest in the impoverished Arab state, which is subject to heavy sanctions from western powers.

Syria is grappling with a deepening economic crisis that in recent weeks [triggered anti-regime protests](#) in the southern city of Sweida.

Alessandro Arduino, affiliate lecturer at the Lau China Institute, King's College London, said reconstruction would be on the table when Assad met Xi. But he said this was less attractive for China than many believed, especially with Chinese companies weighed down by an economic slowdown in their domestic market.

Instead, Assad's visit was an opportunity for Beijing to increase its diplomatic profile in the Middle East, a region it depends on for much of its oil and gas imports, Arduino said.

"First and foremost for Beijing is the narrative about China being not only an economic juggernaut but also a diplomatic juggernaut," he added.

China has traditionally focused on its expanding trade partnerships in the region and avoided getting involved in politics. But it surprised many in March by [brokering an agreement](#) between Saudi Arabia and Iran that led to the regional rivals agreeing to restore diplomatic relations.

Analysts said that was a sign of Xi's desire to expand China's influence across the Middle East, where the US has traditionally been the dominant foreign power. "What happened with the Saudi-Iran deal can be duplicated," Arduino said.

Assad has made few foreign trips since a popular uprising erupted in 2011 and morphed into civil war.

In May, he travelled to Saudi Arabia for the first time since the conflict began after Riyadh — which previously supported the Syrian opposition — led a regional diplomatic push to have Syria reintegrated into the Arab League.

However, the regime continues to struggle to attract investment for reconstruction, partly because of western sanctions. As the economic malaise has worsened, analysts said Damascus has come increasingly to rely on the [export of Captagon](#), a highly addictive amphetamine, for hard currency. The Syrian pound plunged to record lows in August.

Emile Hokayem, director of regional security at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, said Assad would "eagerly travel" to Beijing "to embed Syria into a rising axis of anti-western autocratic states" as well as to benefit from Chinese-led connectivity projects.

Hokayem said the Syrian president would want to diversify his international relationships given his acute dependency on Russia and Iran, sponsors that had not provided economic or reconstruction assistance.

“China will carefully assess the merits of being involved in a war-torn devastated narco-state with a dysfunctional government,” he said, adding that Beijing would nevertheless be happy to “poke the US on yet another Middle East battleground”.

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