

*Syria's president arrives in China
for first visit in almost two
decades*

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Beijing, September 22 (RHC)-- Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has arrived in China for high-level talks on the expansion of political and economic relations between the two countries, marking his first official trip to the East Asian country in almost two decades.

Assad arrived in the Chinese eastern city of Hangzhou on Thursday, where he is scheduled to attend the opening ceremony of the Asian Games along with more than a dozen foreign dignitaries at the weekend. He will also lead a delegation for a series of meetings in several Chinese cities, including a summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

The latest visit comes amid a shift among countries to improve relations with Damascus which found itself in the grip of a foreign-backed militancy and terrorism in 2011. China could play a major role in the future of Syria's reconstruction, which is expected to cost tens of billions of dollars, observers say.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's upcoming visit to China could prove a boost for Syria's reconstruction efforts and invigorate the sanctions-hit Arab economy, says a Syrian political analyst. Last year, Syria joined China's Belt and Road Initiative, a mega project in which Beijing has been expanding its influence in developing regions through infrastructure projects.

This is while Damascus has made clear that it has no interest in Western support for reconstruction in view of the West's role in the war and the fact that its help will be tied to unacceptable political demands.

The Syrian president faces sanctions imposed by the United States, Europe, Australia, Canada, and Switzerland, but efforts to apply multilateral sanctions against his government have failed to garner unanimous support at the United Nations Security Council, which China and Russia are members of.

Assad's last visit to China took place in 2004. It was the first visit by a Syrian head of state to China since the countries established diplomatic ties in 1956.

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