Chinese Involvement in the Middle East: The Libyan and Syrian Crises

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China's involvement in the Middle East has increased in recent years. Regardless of Beijing's assertions that it does not want to take active part in the region's political developments and it intends to focus solely on economic matters, a gradual shift on its part toward involvement in political and military processes is evident.[1] This shift in China's Middle East policy is not necessarily the result of any official decision, nor does it bespeak a formal strategic change. In fact, China's sincerity about its wish to distance itself from the complexities of the Middle East should not be doubted. The Chinese leadership customarily regards the Middle East as "a graveyard for great powers"; for China, the region is unfamiliar and incomprehensible. It finds it difficult to understand the key role of religion in Middle East politics. Aware of the strong interests of the other global powers, it fears becoming entrapped in the quagmire of internal conflicts in the Muslim world.[2] At the same time, given the growing Chinese involvement in global politics as well as its ambition to lead the developing nations, its increasing dependence on oil imports, and its growing need for foreign markets and raw materials, China cannot refrain from involvement in the region, and regional dynamics and internal forces operating in China will likely reinforce this trend. Furthermore, given China's rise in status to that of a global power, expectations are developing in the region and among other global powers that China will become more involved with the Middle East. When US Secretary of State John Kerry visited Beijing in April 2013, his talks with

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the Chinese President were not confined to East Asia-related questions or matters pertaining to Chinese-American relations; their discussions also extended to global issues, including "the challenge of Iran and nuclear weapons, Syria, and the Middle East."[3]

This situation raises significant questions about how China will deepen its involvement in the region. For example, in contrast to Africa, where China has been involved intensively over the past decade, the Middle East since World War II has been a theater of conflict between other large powers that to this day retain essential interests and important allies in the region. The question is what relationship there is between China's growing involvement in the Middle East and its relations with the other global powers.

In addition, growing Chinese involvement in the region at a time of severe conflict within and between the local countries puts two Chinese policy principles to the test: non-intervention in the affairs of other countries and refusal to take a stand on conflicts in the region. These principles are designed to promote China's standing as the leader of the bloc of developing countries, both by highlighting the contrast between it and the US (which is the leader in intrusive action in developing countries), and by maintaining good relations with as many countries as possible. The resistance to international intervention also derives from China's concern that such practices will one day be exercised against it. These principles reflect China's tendency to prefer to keep existing regimes in power, and to retain political unity over the promotion of values such as human rights. The question is, therefore, how China will maneuver between these principles and the constraints arising from its political activity in the region.

One of the main reasons for the uncertainty is not only the disparity between China's rhetoric and its actions in the region, but also the gradual, non-uniform, and at times also camouflaged shifts in its pattern of action. In an article that reviewed the change in China's stance on the imposition of unilateral sanctions, James Reilly asserted that "China rarely openly declares its economic sanctions. Instead, Beijing prefers to use vague threats, variation in leadership visits, selective purchases (or non-purchase), and other informal measures."[4] An assessment of China's approach to the region, therefore, requires looking at both small and large changes in its activity in the region, focusing not necessarily on the extent of any one measure or its results, rather the degree to which it deviates

from the standard pattern of behavior. To this end the article analyzes China's behavior in the crises in Libya and Syria – two countries included in the Chinese diplomatic region of Western Asia and North Africa.

China and the Libyan Crisis

China's relations with Libya were problematic even before the crisis of the Arab Spring. In 2009, Libyan Foreign Minister Moussa Koussa accused China of exploiting Africa's resources and people, and condemned its behavior on the African continent as neo-colonialism. China, whose opposition to imperialism and colonialism constitutes one of the fundamentals of its foreign policy, took this allegation very seriously, but its economic interests overcame other considerations and tensions were relaxed.[5]

Nevertheless, China's economic involvement in Libya was apparently not a single decisive factor, and when on February 25, 2011 President Obama announced the imposition of sanctions against the Qaddafı regime in response to the violence in the country, China expressed no opposition or protest. The following day, it joined the other UN Security Council members in passing Resolution 1970 banning the supply of weapons to the Qaddafı forces, and one month later abstained (as did Russia) on Security Council Resolution 1973, thereby enabling passage of the resolution. This resolution declared Libyan air space a no-fly zone, and announced that the necessary measures would be taken to protect Libyan citizens from attacks by Qaddafı. The resolution won the support of the Arab League, and while it did not provide a clear mandate for supplying military aid to the rebels, since Russia and China were expected to veto such wording, it was indeed possible under this resolution to conduct an air attack on Qaddafı's aircraft and against ground targets. This Security Council resolution conflicted with China's official policy, which opposed intervention by force in the internal affairs of other countries, but China did not block the resolution. The Arab world's opposition to Qaddafı was likely one of the reasons for this, and as China subsequently stated, Beijing did not expect NATO to use such heavy firepower.

Indeed, the implementation of the resolution deviated from China's policy. On March 19, 2011, a coalition of foreign forces led by NATO carried out an attack in Libya; 120 missiles were launched against Libyan air defense targets. French aircraft attacked forces supporting Qaddafı in Benghazi, and cruise missiles were launched against air defense targets

in the capital of Tripoli and in Misrata. Like Russia, China took a dim view of these attacks, noting on various occasions that it supported a peaceful resolution of the crisis, and expressing concern about the consequences of military intervention. Furthermore, for some time after the rebel forces set up an alternative government, China refused to recognize it. China later asserted that the Western powers had distorted the meaning of the Security Council resolution, and by using such extensive military force against Qaddafi had deceived the other countries involved in passing it.[6]

At the same time, in addition to its passive diplomatic line, China took several more significant actions. When the rioting in the country escalated, China took measures to evacuate its citizens from Libya. Before the uprising, there were 30,000 Chinese citizens in Libya; by February 25, 2011, Beijing announced that military aircraft and ships had evacuated 12,000 Chinese citizens from Libya and transferred them to China or to stable countries in the region. This was the first time that China evacuated such a large number of its citizens from a foreign country. In addition to highlighting China's new logistical and technological capabilities, however, the measure reflected the growing tendency in the ruling Chinese establishment to broaden China's activity around the world.

In effect, the argument on this question developed in the first decade of the 21st century, at a time when China was expanding its economic activity and certain parties in the leadership (including the military establishment) contended that China should develop its military capability beyond its borders in order to protect its interests. In contrast, others asserted that China should continue its foreign policy through economic and diplomatic means only, as it had done since the beginning of the reforms in China in 1978. Evacuating its citizens from Libya, which was one of the most significant steps taken, illustrated the growing acceptance of the former approach.[7]

In another dimension, already in June 2011, in contrast to its traditional policy of non-intervention, China hosted representatives of the Libyan opposition, who met with the Chinese foreign minister. China described the National Transitional Council as "an important partner for dialogue." Presumably the purpose of the meetings was to agree on measures with a possible new regime in order to ensure continuity of China's economic projects in Libya if the regime were to fall, particularly the continuation of oil supplies. Another factor that likely led China to conduct a public

meeting of this kind was the negative attitude of the Arab countries toward Qaddafi, which eased Beijing's concern about criticism of its conduct.[8]

Active Chinese involvement also occurred with aid to the respective warring parties. In September 2011, Beijing confirmed that representatives of NORINCO, one of China's leading arms corporation, had met in July with representatives of the Qaddafi regime to step up arms transactions for his forces totaling $200 million, including air-to-ground missiles. The meeting was conducted at a time when the international sanctions on the supply of arms to Qaddafi's forces, which China had also signed, were already in effect. The reports of the meeting sparked severe criticism of China, both in the international arena and from the new Libyan transitional government. The Beijing administration stressed that it had not known of the meetings, and that no arms were actually sold to the Qaddafi regime.[9]

Libyan rebel forces killed Qaddafi on October 20, 2011, and the head of the rebel forces council announced that Libya was now a "liberated" nation. A fresh situation thus arose in Libya, and China acted quickly to establish relations with the new government. Once the decision was taken to end international action in Libya, China announced that it would return its ambassador to the country. In addition, China declared its willingness to aid Libya in promoting bilateral relations on a basis of mutual respect, equality, and reciprocal benefit in order to advance joint projects between the two countries.[10]

To a large extent, this action was intended to restore economic ties with Libya, which were severely damaged by China's hesitation in transferring its support from Qaddafi's regime to the rebels. About 75 Chinese companies operated in Libya before the uprising, with the volume of their contracts estimated at $20 billion. In addition, more than 30,000 Chinese workers worked in Libya, and 3 percent of the crude oil imported to China came from Libya.[11] The Libyan market was not a significant target for Chinese exports, but it was important for China to protect and promote its investments in the country. In August, the deputy head of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce stated that China hoped that after the end of the upheaval in Libya and the restoration of governmental authority, Libya would continue to protect the interests and rights of the Chinese investors. This was probably a response to the statement by a representative of AGOCO, the Libyan oil company, that future cooperation between the Libyan oil industry and international

powers, such as Russia and China, was liable to be negatively affected by the latter's lack of direct support for the rebels when the conflict began and afterwards.[12]

Chinese Intervention in the Syrian Crisis

Perhaps even more than in Libya, Chinese economic interests in Syria were fairly limited. In 2011 Chinese exports to Syria totaled $4.2 billion, including communications equipment, heavy machinery, and other goods for industry. China was also involved in the Syrian oil industry. In particular, after the European embargo on the purchase of crude oil from Syria was imposed in 2011, China took the European place, thereby obtaining control of this sphere. The China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) is a shareholder in the two largest oil companies in Syria, and signed transactions worth billions of dollars in exchange for research and development assistance in the sector. Another Chinese company, Sincochem, owns rights in one of the two largest oil fields in Syria. Armaments is an additional field in which China has interests in Syria, though the volume of activity there is likewise not large. On the eve of the outbreak of the rebellion in Syria, China, together with North Korea, was responsible for 30 percent of the weapons transactions signed with the Assad regime, while Russia accounted for 50 percent.[13]

Nonetheless, China's moves to uphold the Syrian regime were much more significant than in Libya. The popular uprising against the Assad regime began in March 2011, and the regime's forces quickly began to forcefully suppress the demonstrators – a pattern that spread rapidly around the country. Despite this escalation, Chinese special envoy to the Middle East Wu Sike met in Damascus with Syrian Vice President Farouq al-Shara a few weeks after the uprising broke out. Al-Shara told him that Syria was willing to step up bilateral relations and tighten cooperation in various areas. He added that he hoped that China would play an extensive positive role in the peace process in the Middle East. The Chinese envoy responded by saying that China was closely following the recent developments in the Middle East and their effect on the peace process, and since Syria had widespread influence on the international and regional theaters in general, especially on the peace process in the Middle East, Beijing wished to develop and tighten its ties with Syria in various spheres.[14]

China expressed more explicit support for the Syrian regime in late April 2011, when it joined Russia in vetoing an American and European initiative to condemn Syria in the Security Council. China explained its decision that a solution should be sought through dialogue, not imposed through force.[15] Referring explicitly to the veto, the Chinese foreign minister asserted that China had voted this way out of caution – an unsubtle reference to previous Chinese claims that the Western powers had cynically exploited the Security Council resolution on Libya to use increased force against the Qaddafi regime, and a declaration that China would not lend its hand to such an action again. Shortly afterwards, Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal al-Mekdad visited China, where he met with Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi. A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson claimed that they discussed bilateral relations and regional issues. A similar expression of support was reflected in October 2011, when China and Russia again cast vetoes in the Security Council on a condemnation proposed by Western countries. Two years later, when following the use of chemical weapons against civilians there was discussion of international intervention in Syria, China insisted that indications that chemical weapons had been used were not unequivocal.[16]

In contrast to the case of Libya, therefore, China has not conformed to the Western line. Clearly, support for the Assad regime and adoption of a joint position with Russia correspond to China's fundamental interests and principles: preserving stability in the Middle East, adhering to the principle of non-intervention, and providing a counterweight to Western influence. Keeping the Assad regime in power also obstructs a takeover of the country by Islamic forces – forces regarded negatively by Beijing, although this is presumably not the main consideration from its perspective.

Support for Assad, however, has put China in an uncomfortable position. The protection that Beijing has provided to the Assad regime has aroused internal criticism in China, given the existing dissatisfaction with the Communist Party's centralized rule and the complaints against Syria's violation of human rights. This is well reflected in China's lively blogsphere, where there are many condemnations by Chinese citizens of the support for the Assad regime.[17] Chinese support for the ruling regime in Syria has also drawn criticism in developing countries, especially Muslim countries – countries where Beijing aspires for leadership and whose interests it seeks to represent vis-à-vis the developed countries.

Finally, due to China's efforts to expand its global influence, following in Russia's footsteps has aroused concern in China that it will be perceived as a satellite with no independent policy. Based on these considerations, China has taken a number of steps to highlight its reservations about what is going on in Syria, and its willingness to initiate measures to solve the situation.

One example is the condemnation of the massacres by the Assad regime in villages of the Houla district in May 2011 following a bombardment of houses there. The official statement by China expressed appall at the number of civilians killed, and included a severe condemnation of the cruel massacre of innocent civilians. China demanded an investigation of the event and immediate implementation of a ceasefire by the warring parties, acceptance of the relevant Security Council resolutions, and implementation of the roadmap presented by the UN Special Representative for Syria, Kofi Annan, for an end to the conflict.[18] In December of that year, China voiced support for a Russian initiative to solve the crisis, which reflected a relatively tough attitude toward the Syrian regime through explicit mention of "the use of disproportionate force on the part of the Syrian authorities," and stated, "The Syrian government should be urged to end the suppression of those who are exercising their right to free expression, association, and organization."[19]

Characteristically, however, China balanced its criticism with support of the Assad regime. In July 2012, it refrained from taking part in the "Friends of Syria" Summit, attended by about 100 countries, which was designed to stiffen the international sanctions against the Assad regime.[20] The same month, together with Russia, China cast another veto against a new Western initiative in the Security Council, this time for the imposition of sanctions against the Assad regime in response to the prolonged warfare and bloodshed.

Another and far more unusual measure taken by Beijing with respect to the Syrian crisis was the publication of an independent initiative to solve the crisis in Syria. The first step in this direction was the issuing of a six-point statement in March 2012, whereby the Syrian regime would engage without delay in a political dialogue with the rebel forces through an impartial mediator on behalf of the UN or the Arab League.[21] What was new was not the initiative's content, but the fact that it had been

raised at all, since for the first time China deviated from the passivity it had hitherto exhibited and acted without Russia.

Another development occurred in October 2012, when shortly after the US declared that the Syrian opposition needed new leadership, China converted its six-point statement into an official initiative: a four-point plan for solving the crisis. As the first stage, the parties were called upon to halt the violence by themselves. In the next stage, they were to draft a roadmap for the process of political transition in the country, while the Assad regime would remain in place in order to ensure political stability until the talks were completed. In the third stage, the international community was to act in close cooperation with the UN-Arab League Joint Special Representative for Syria to implement the international resolutions on the subject that had been taken under UN auspices and by the Security Council. In the fourth stage, the international community was called on to bolster its efforts to solve the humanitarian problems caused by the crisis, in part by increasing its humanitarian aid, but without politicization or militarization – a hint at what China asserts was the West's cynical use of humanitarian aid. According to the plan, the UN-Arab League mediator would play a dominant role at all stages by sitting in on the talks, while receiving support and aid from countries in the region and from the major powers. On the other hand, the plan completely ruled out unilateral international intervention, pressure on the parties, and removal of the Assad regime by force.[22]

Finally, China took an active role in the Syrian crisis to protect its interests in the country. On a narrow and immediate level, it was prepared to take action in Syria in order to evacuate its citizens from the country if their security was threatened. In late April 2011, the Chinese ambassador to Syria stated that the preparations for this evacuation had already been made.[23] On a broader level, China also acted to safeguard its interests in Syria, should the regime fall. While China continued to express opposition to any international intervention in Syrian internal affairs or action against the Assad regime, the Chinese foreign minister met with representatives of the Syrian opposition in Beijing in September 2012. Another meeting of opposition leaders with official Chinese representatives occurred on February 5, 2013, when the Chinese ambassador to Egypt met in Cairo with the leader of the rebel forces. The ambassador emphasized that China supported implementation of a

regime change in Syria as early as possible on a format acceptable to both sides in order to avert continued bloodshed and to stabilize the region.[24]

Conclusion

As illustrated by China's actions in the two crises, the motive for its involvement in the Middle East remains pursuit of its own interests – first of all, the supply of oil, and in recent years, establishing its standing as a global power through offering an alternative to the American agenda. At the same time, it is evident that China is now willing to take an active role that incurs more risks than in the past in order to promote these interests, even if it is unwilling to invest resources for the sake of shaping the region according to its preferences.

China's responses to the crises in Libya and Syria shed new light on several common assumptions about China's motives and behavior in the Middle East. First of all, the accepted assumption about Chinese involvement in the Middle East is that China's interest in the region is basically economic, and that economic considerations dominate the nature of its involvement there. There can be no doubt about the first part of this assumption, but an analysis of China's intervention in the Libyan and Syrian crises does not support the second part. Were economic considerations responsible for steering China's actions in the Middle East, it could have been expected to invest more policy efforts in the Libyan crisis and take stronger action to consolidate its relations with the new regime, while more vigorously opposing the solidification of Western influence in the country. In fact, China is more involved in Syria than in Libya, and is showing its willingness to pay a political price for consolidating its relations with the current Syrian regime and its possible replacements despite its relatively limited economic interest in this country.

Another common assumption is that China is not inclined to intervene in political events in the Middle East, both because of its declared policy and due to concern about becoming entangled in the regional quagmire. This assumption is also not supported by an analysis of the two crises, since in each crisis China took actions for the purpose of shaping the course of events to some extent, mainly through its votes in the Security Council but also by being in touch with the rebel forces in both countries. Significant considerations in this context were the views of the countries in the region and the global powers involved, and

not necessarily diplomatic principles or economic calculations. Finally, due to concern about harm to its citizens, China took unprecedented operational measures in the region, while demonstrating its logistic and operational capability in coordination with other countries for the purpose of protecting its interests and evacuating its citizens.

In addition, these test cases cast doubt on the assumption of China's centralized control of its foreign policy. Assuming that the attempts by representatives of the NORINCO weapons corporation to sell arms to Qaddafı's forces after the crisis began in Libya – an act of enormous significance, given the violation of international norms and rules it involved and its possible effect on the development of the fighting – were carried out without the knowledge or approval of the authorities, an assessment of the government agencies responsible for conducting China's foreign policy is not sufficient for an analysis of China's acts in the Middle East.

With the common assumptions thus not entirely accurate, China's actions in the Libyan and Syrian crises give rise to a number of hypotheses concerning the pattern of its activity in the region. First, analyzing China's behavior requires addressing various non-economic interests, first and foremost its competitive and cooperative relations with the major powers. Second, China's votes in the Security Council conform to the Russian line, but as expressed by the Chinese initiative concerning Syria, Beijing's contacts with the rebel forces in Syria, and its efforts to consolidate its economic interests in Libya, China is gradually developing separate interests and policies in the region that are likely to lead to an independent line. This fits in with a broader trend in Chinese foreign policy – the designing of a leading independent position in the international arena.[25]

Finally, China's support for the Assad regime, despite international and regional criticism, is likely to indicate China's willingness to deviate from a neutral policy and adhere more decisively to positions aimed at promoting its regional and international interests. The Libyan case shows that even if its position arouses anger against it, China's economic power enables it to strike a new path in pursuit of the goals that it has set for itself.

Notes

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12 This is a short description of the events. Full details appear in the source cited in the preceding footnote – Branigan, "China Looks to Protect its Assets in a Post-Gaddafi Libya."

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