

BULLETIN

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China's Position Towards Recent Events in North Africa

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The recent crises in North Africa are an issue of concern for the PRC's foreign and internal policy. An increase in economic engagement in the region prompted China to modify its principle of non-interference, which is a core of PRC diplomacy. That the largest evacuation of Chinese nationals in the PRC's history occurred recently in Libya using military equipment to protect the operation, probably without approval from Tripoli, vindicates this assumption. Furthermore, the social reasons for discontent in Africa urged Chinese leaders to strengthen "social management" in order to prevent similar events in the PRC.

Recent events in North Africa, including a referendum in Sudan, the changes of power in Tunisia and Egypt and the unstable situation in Libya, are serious tests for China's external and internal policy. China's foreign policy is based on the so-called principle of non-interference, which refers to the Westphalian sense of sovereignty—no one country can interfere in the internal affairs of another country. But as China expands, its engagement in world affairs has led it to rethink and even modify principles of its external policy. The events in North Africa harm Chinese economic interests in the region and can be seen as a turning point in changing the real meaning of the non-interference strategy.

Some of the reasons for the displays of discontent in North Africa—social issues such as high unemployment and large disparities in income—also are common phenomena in the PRC. These factors are perceived as a potential threat to China's internal stability, which is a prerequisite for the further economic development that is fundamental to the legitimacy of the Communist Party of China (CPC).

China's presence in Africa still is increasing, mainly because of economic interests such as access to raw materials, energy resources and outlet markets. But political factors should not be disregarded. The PRC's objective is to gain influence in international affairs, which requires allies mainly among the so-called developing countries. Furthermore, a sense of stability in areas where China is deeply engaged economically is crucial for preserving the PRC's core national interests, e.g., economic growth.

China's Reaction. The first test for China was a referendum held in January in Sudan. The PRC is the largest foreign investor in the Sudanese oil sector and maintains close relations with the government in Khartoum. But the awareness that the referendum was inevitable and the probability that Southern secession was very high led China to develop a dialogue with leaders from the South while also preserving good relations with the North. In 2008, China opened its consulate in Juba, the capital of Southern Sudan. It was an apparent manifestation of the limits of the sovereignty principle promoted by China and proof that preserving its interests required diplomatic manoeuvring. The PRC was one of the observers during the referendum in Sudan and supports the North-South peace process.

Recent events in Tunisia and Egypt also were challenges for China. Tunisia is perceived as a country with similarities to China—an autocratic regime with a market economy. The recent protests could be seen as a weakness of the so-called China model, defined as the coexistence of a market economy with a non-democratic political system. China's interests in Egypt, however, are connected with access to the Suez Canal and Chinese-Egyptian joint-venture companies located in the China Economic and Trade Cooperation zone in Egypt.

The major risk for the PRC government was that protests against presidents Ben Ali and Mubarak could be seen in Chinese society as examples worth following, and that could lead to unrest in the PRC. This explains why China's reports from Tunisia and Egypt were censored, relaying only information about the results of the protests (the instability) while avoiding explanations of the reasons.

It can be assumed that the same scenario was prepared to inform the public about the situation in Libya, but Qaddafi's crackdown against protesters forced the PRC to change its tactic. The violence that broke out created a serious challenge for China to protect its citizens in Libya. China's economic engagement in the country is significant. It is estimated that 36 thousand Chinese nationals work for 75 Chinese companies in Libya, mainly in the oil and gas industry. The PRC arranged and carried out the largest evacuations of its citizens from abroad in its history. It was the first time that China used its military forces outside the Asia-Pacific region to evacuate its nationals. The PRC deployed its frigate *Xuzhou* to the Mediterranean Sea to protect the operation and 12 military planes to assist. Eventually, all Chinese citizens were evacuated. It is highly probable that the PRC had not received approval from Tripoli to enter Libyan airspace or deploy the *Xuzhou* near its coasts.

China's Stance Towards Libya in the UN Security Council. China's interest in stabilizing the situation in Libya in the face of threats to its own interests led the PRC to vote in favour of UN Security Council Resolution No. 1970, which was adopted February 26. The resolution introduced an arms embargo, a travel ban for Libyan officials and a freeze on their assets. The PRC's permanent representative to the UN, Li Baoding, said that China was very much concerned about the situation in Libya. The most urgent needs were a cessation to the violence, an end to the bloodshed and civilian casualties and a resolution to the crisis through peaceful means, such as dialogue. He stressed that the safety and interest of foreign nationals in Libya must be ensured.

Although China accepted sanctions, the PRC abstained from voting on UNSC Resolution No. 1973, which was adopted on March 17, calling for a no-fly zone over Libya, the aim of which is to prevent the bombing of civilians. Establishing a no-fly zone requires the destruction of infrastructure such as radar and anti-aircraft weapons, which goes against China's principle of non-interference. The resolution mentions using "all necessary measures" to protect civilians. Li Baoding disclosed that China has serious difficulty with that part of the resolution but attaches great importance to the relevant decision by the 22-member Arab League on the establishment of no-fly zone over Libya. He said that China attaches importance to the position of African countries and the African Union. It seems to be apparent that Arab and other states' acquiescence to the establishment of a no-fly zone was the main reason why China did not veto the resolution.

Conclusions. China's position towards recent events in North Africa—support for the referendum in Sudan, its votes in the UNSC and evacuation operation—shows that Beijing wants to have an important voice in world affairs while maintaining as its top priority the protection of core national interests. China is creating a softer image of itself as a responsible player and an effective, capable and competent power that immediately responds to threats, even if far from China. Additionally, the deployment of the *Xuzhou* is an example of China's growing hard power—military capabilities to overcome traditional and non-traditional threats. This power is necessary in pursuing a "going out" strategy as it refers promoting Chinese investments abroad. The reaction to the crisis in Libya shows that China's active engagement in protecting its interests outside China will be growing.

The recent events in North Africa also have affected China's internal policy. Chinese leaders are seriously concerned about social problems that could not only trigger protests in the PRC but also undermine the position of the CPC. In February, Zhou Yongkang, a member of the CPC Central Committee and Public Security Commission, said that potential social problems must be detected and resolved in time. Furthermore, the so-called social management (*shehui guanli*) must be constantly strengthened. Paradoxically, concerns about a potential internal crisis in China induced by events in Africa was confirmed by an editorial in the *People's Daily*, a mouthpiece of the CPC, titled "China is not the Middle East." It says that taking advantage of the situation in North Africa to spark "street protests" in China would be a failure. For Chinese society, stability is fundamental, and the power of the CPC is firm. The text states there is no need to change the power of the Communist Party in the PRC. The risk of overthrowing leaders in China through violent protest is slim since the country abolished life tenure for its leaders and implemented a mechanism to change them. It is a significant difference in comparison to North African countries where the crises arose.