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Syria: What China Has Learned From its Libya Experience

BY YUN SUN

China's joint veto along with Russia of the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) on Syria has provoked fierce international criticism. Labeled as "responsible for Syria's genocide," Beijing's international image has struck a new low. China's decision to cast the unpopular vote was apparently well thought-out, as evidenced by its consistent diplomatic rhetoric and actions, both before and after the veto. However, in analyzing China's motivation, many analysts seemed to have missed an important point. That is, China's experience concerning Libya in 2011 had a direct impact on its actions regarding Syria this time around.

Yun Sun, former Visiting Fellow with the Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies at The Brookings Institution, argues that "The bitter lesson from its belated and ongoing unstable relationship with the Libyan National Transitional Council has prompted Beijing to adopt a more sophisticated hedging strategy on Syria."

Beijing's perception of gaining nothing while losing everything in Libya after abstaining on UNSCR 1973 significantly contributed to its decision to veto the Syria resolution. The bitter lesson from its belated and ongoing unstable relationship with the Libyan National Transitional Council (NTC) has prompted Beijing to adopt a more sophisticated hedging strategy on Syria. Beijing is currently actively building relations with the Syrian opposition, while simultaneously pursuing a mediation role inside and outside of Syria.

China's abstention from UNSCR 1973 cleared the road for NATO military intervention in Libya, and although China sees its acquiescence as directly contributing to the fall of Muammar Qaddafi, it was rather disappointed with the payoff. First of all, at home and abroad, the abstention was seen as Beijing's short-sighted compliance to the West. It raised speculation about whether China was abandoning its long held non-interference principle, tarnishing the very image that Beijing takes great pride in. Domestic nationalists criticized Beijing for "compromising its principles" and "acquiescing to Western demands." Internationally, the same is true, with some countries questioning the independence of China's foreign policy and its ability to handle Western pressure.

Meanwhile, China's perceived compromise did not bring the desired outcome. Neither the West nor the NTC showed much appreciation for China's abstention. Beijing's historical relationship with Gaddafi, including oil deals and arms sales, was scrutinized to substantiate Chinese support of the authoritarian regime. Its belated recognition of the NTC and lack of contribution to the military campaign were perceived by many as Beijing's rejection of the Libyan "democratic movement."

Furthermore, China found its acquiescence as having little influence in securing favorable considerations for its economic interests in Libya. When Beijing urged the NTC to protect its oil interests last summer, it was shocked and humiliated by the public announcement from the Libyan oil company AGOCO that they "don't have a problem with Western countries, but may have political issues with Russia and China." As of this February, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce is still "in consultation" with the new government regarding the protection of Chinese assets and honoring deals

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reached under Gaddafi. According to the Chinese media, the total loss to Chinese companies from the power transition is more than \$20 billion. In Beijing’s cost-benefit analysis, China’s acquiescence to UNSCR 1973—which resulted in Western military intervention—was a complete loss.

A similar vote on Syria would have fared no better. According to Yan Xuetong, a prominent Chinese strategist, the West and Arab states did not show any appreciation for China’s effort on Libya and instead labeled China an “irresponsible power” for not participating in the military campaign. Therefore, if the Syrian opposition prevails, it will only thank the West for its “real military support,” not China. As for China’s international image, Yan argues “regardless of how China votes on Syria, the West will always see China as an undemocratic country with a poor human rights record and the Arab states will always side with the West.” Therefore, China’s veto of the Syria resolution does not fundamentally cost China anything. And unlike in Libya, where China had to evacuate over 30,000 Chinese citizens and had substantial assets on the ground, it only has about 800 Chinese citizens and limited economic interests in Syria.

While Beijing saw little to lose, it saw much to gain by vetoing the Syria resolution. China’s veto saved Moscow from international isolation—the joint veto was a powerful demonstration of Sino-Russia diplomatic cooperation—a favor that Russia now has to return. Furthermore, the veto is seen as conducive to maintaining the current power balance in the Middle East, which China prefers over a military campaign to remove Bashar al-Assad, Syria’s president, and indirectly influence Syria’s regional ally, Iran. Indeed, some Chinese analysts argue that the campaign against the Iran-backed Assad government is essentially a Christian-Sunni Muslim coalition against Shiite Muslims. Furthermore, the veto prevented a double precedent to legitimize UN military intervention as a method to remove a sovereign government in conflict with democratic oppositions supported by the West, a scenario that Beijing has to consider through the lens of its own domestic politics.

While blocking the UN resolution, China is developing its own strategy to handle the Syria situation. Traditionally, Beijing rejects relations with democratic oppositions in authoritarian states for fear of antagonizing the ruling government. This philosophy shaped China’s policy towards Libya’s NTC and precluded ties until rather late in the game, which in turn turned out to be politically and economically detrimental to Beijing’s interests.

Regarding Syria, China has formulated a far more sophisticated hedging strategy. Rather than siding with either Assad or the opposition and standing aside to “wait and see,” Beijing is actively betting on both. China’s UN veto has shielded Assad from military intervention, but at the same time, it quickly extended an overture to the Syrian democratic opposition. Twenty-four hours after China cast the veto, a delegation from the Syrian National Committee for Democratic Change—a key Syrian opposition group—visited Beijing at the invitation of the Foreign Ministry to meet with Zhai Jun, Vice Foreign Minister on Africa and West Asia. The Ministry praised the meetings as “exchanges of opinions on the situation in Syria and a thorough articulation of China’s positions.”

As a supplement to the hedging strategy, China is stepping up its mediation and engagement throughout the region with unprecedented enthusiasm, lobbying for a political alternative to the military option. During February, China’s Foreign Ministry dispatched senior delegations to Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, Jordan, Israel and Palestine for diplomatic consultations. Through proactive diplomacy, China is aiming to broker dialogues to promote an inclusive political process. Whether China’s new strategies prove to be successful remains to be seen. But from the UN veto to new approaches towards the Syrian opposition and actively seeking to mediate, China’s policy towards the Arab Spring is getting more mature, flexible, and sophisticated.

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