

Syria: A Litmus Test for Chinese Foreign Policy

Written by Ghaidaa Hetou

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GHAIDAA HETOU, JUN 20 2012

China's adamant opposition to forceful regime change and unilateral sanctions are the hallmarks of the emerging superpower. Supported by Russia, China is mobilizing an international trajectory of multilateralism and cooperation among various international actors in order to manage the Syrian crisis. After NATO's recent military activities in Libya in 2011, China and Russia increased their assertiveness regarding their opposition, along with BRICS, to forceful regime change and unilateral military actions.

The contrast in international conduct during military interventions – i.e. between Iraq 2003 and Libya 2011 – has created a dyadic rivalry between the US and China. This rivalry cuts deep into the philosophical nature of both nations; the US as an example for the world, and China as a facilitator of co-existence. Both international positions have their supporters in the Middle Eastern region. Iran and Iraq support the Russian/Chinese stance, while the Gulf countries support the US and Britain. It was a matter of time until this international rivalry filtered into the Syrian crisis.

The geopolitics of Syria, and its historically ideological leaning towards the USSR and later Russia, at least since the 1950s and the rise of Arab Nationalism, gave the current crisis a distinct international dimension. The Syrian government was a thorn in US foreign policy in the Middle Eastern region in the last fifty years. Years of US-imposed isolation and economic sanction did not break the back of the Ba'athist regime in Damascus. But the 2011 uprising, fueled by this international rivalry, did put the regime in a vulnerable position. For numerous reasons, the management of the Syrian crisis became a corner stone and a litmus test for China's foreign policy.

The Chinese delegation heading the UN Security Council for June 2012 has an ambitious duty call. The timing coincides with great uncertainty encompassing the elections and post-election period in Egypt, as well as political upheaval in Yemen, Bahrain and fears of instability in countries that are traditionally US allies. China's position against confrontation or sanctions imposed on Syria is arguably linked to its subtle increase in assertiveness as an international power broker, as highlighted by its double veto at the Security Council (once in October 2011 and again February 2012). In order to bolster China's emerging assertiveness and give credence to its position as a supporter of sovereignty and multilateralism, it is imperative for China to succeed in bringing about a political solution to the Syrian crisis.

China's vision and its proclaimed foreign policy principles emanate from a long-standing tradition, since the 1950s, of the five principles: respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-interference, equality and peaceful coexistence. These high-minded principles are flexible enough to bend to *Realpolitik* and strategic interests. Yet, these foreign policy principles create an opposing trajectory in international conduct to that of the traditional Western great powers, such as the US, Britain and France.

The dilemma for China is not only to prove the viability and relevance of its foreign policy as a 'better way', but to also reconcile the international outcry for 'action' to protect the victims in armed conflicts. Action is precisely what US and British foreign policy readily provide through the economic and military power of imposing embargos, economic sanctions, and military intervention through the pretext of humanitarian intervention. A crucial aspect in Chinese foreign policy is to create a moral counterweight to 'humanitarian intervention', which was historically a pretext for waging war. Building up a multilateral cooperative plan and encouraging indigenous solutions to conflicts is more time-consuming, yet it suits China's non-confrontational style.

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The Syrian crisis is deteriorating, especially since Kofi Annan's UN/Arab League sanctioned mission did not yet deliver signs of lasting improvements on the ground. Kofi Annan's plan is still the only way out of the crisis, yet the confrontation between the Syrian government and the armed groups – which allegedly include foreign fighters and al-Qaeda – is intensifying. The violence has increased in areas surrounding Homs, Latakia, Hamah and Deir al Zor. In a geographic sense, the violent clashes are underway simultaneously from the southern border towns of Syria, to the north and east. In a matter of a year, Syria has shifted from being a regional player in the Middle East, to being an object of international bargaining between the great powers.

After the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the increase of economic sanctions on Iran, the United States carried the brunt of the foggy outcome. The less than satisfactory situations in Iraq and Afghanistan are casting doubt on the viability of revisiting the US and British manual for international crisis management, in this case applying it to Syria. In turn, this international hesitation to repeat the Iraqi or Libyan scenario in Syria is conducive to the Chinese position. It is providing China the necessary political and diplomatic clout to support its mission to coordinate among international actors to support a political transition plan in Syria.

So far, Chinese officials seem to be consistent in their support for peaceful transition and a political outlet to the Syrian crisis. If the upcoming Russian/Chinese-sponsored conference on Syria succeeds in taking the winds out of the feasibility of armed confrontation, and furthermore starts to facilitate the political transition, then China would have made a breakthrough. In other words, China would have passed the crucial test of ascending to international leadership.

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