

BULLETIN

No. 76 (409) • August 8, 2012 • © PISM

Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief), Katarzyna Staniewska (Executive Editor),
Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz, Beata Górka-Winter, Artur Gradziuk, Roderick Parkes, Beata Wojna

China's Position During the Crisis in Syria

Justyna Szczudlik-Tatar

China supported the establishment of the UN mission in Syria and Kofi Annan's plan, but vetoed three UNSC resolutions on Syria, pointing to its foreign policy principle of non-interference. But the main reason is likely to be the "Libyan experience"—both the military intervention which overthrew the existing regime and the subsequent instability which undermined Chinese economic interests. The PRC's manoeuvring approach—talks with the opposition, supporting some of the UN initiatives, and opposing sanctions, is aimed at preventing the "domino effect", strengthening relations with other Middle East states and asserting China's international relevance.

The outbreak of the crisis in Syria in mid-March 2011, which could have destabilised the situation in other Middle East states, posed a serious challenge for China. The Middle East is a significant exporter of energy resources indispensable for China's expanding economy. Furthermore, it serves as an area in which China can demonstrate its rising international status and exercise influence in a region traditionally dominated by the U.S.

China's Reaction to the Crisis in Syria. The PRC condemned violence in Syria and called on all parties to restore peace. It supported the UNSC Resolutions 2042 (deployment of 30 unarmed observers) and 2043 (establishment of the UN Supervision Mission in Syria, UNSMIS), Annan's six-point plan, the extension of the UNSMIS mandate, and the joint communiqué of the Action Group for Syria, adopted in Geneva in June. Nonetheless, China, along with Russia, simultaneously vetoed three UNSC resolutions on Syria, underlining the PRC's foreign policy principle of non-interference.

In the case of the first resolution, introducing sanctions if the Syrian authorities did not cease their crackdown on civilians—a draft proposed by the EU countries and voted in October 2011—the PRC's permanent representative to the UN, Li Baodong, argued that the document could be interpreted as interference in Syrian internal affairs and a violation of sovereignty and territorial integrity, and underlined that sanctions were counterproductive and could exacerbate the situation. A similar approach was noticeable after China's second veto, in February, of a resolution backed by the Arab League, calling for President Assad to step down. China argued that the resolution allowed the possibility of military intervention in Syria. The latest resolution, drafted by the UK, the U.S., France and Germany, calling on Assad to withdraw troops or face sanctions on regime officials, voted on in July, was interpreted in China as putting pressure on only one party to the conflict. China was convinced that, if the resolution was passed, it could aggravate turmoil which may spill over to the whole region. Furthermore, Li Baodong highlighted that the draft resolution violated the consensus reached in Geneva and undermined the efforts of the UN special envoy Kofi Annan.

Apart from the activities at the UN forum, the PRC presented its own agenda on Syria, highlighting the need to resolve the crisis through peaceful means. In March, the Chinese MFA issued a six-point statement, a blueprint for resolving the situation in Syria. The points were: 1) The government and the opposition should cease all acts of violence; 2) Both sides should launch a dialogue without any preconditions; 3) China supported UN humanitarian assistance to Syria and was ready to provide aid, but opposed any interference in Syria's internal affairs under the pretext of "humanitarian" issues; 4) The international community should respect Syrian independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity, hence China was against armed interference to change the regime in Syria; 5) The PRC supported the UN-Arab League joint special envoy to Syria, and his activities to resolve the crisis; 6)

Members of the UNSC should abide by principles of the UN Charter. Moreover, the Chinese vice-minister of foreign affairs met with a group of Syrian opposition representatives in Beijing in February, and the PRC sent a special envoy to Syria. Despite these activities, the development of the events in Syria shows that Chinese diplomatic efforts are highly ineffective.

Libyan Experience. Despite the principle of non-interference, it seems that the main reason for Chinese vetoes is the so-called Libyan experience. In the case of Libya, the PRC voted in favour on Resolution 1970, introducing sanctions, and abstained from voting on Resolution 1973, establishing no-fly zone. It is argued in China that the latter resolution, aimed at protecting civilians in Libya, was treated as justification for NATO's military intervention and of the overthrow of Kaddafi. The action is called "new interventionism" based on the "Libyan model", which means using the rhetoric of protecting democracy, opposing tyranny and respecting human rights in order to utilise military forces to change the existing political regime. The PRC is also concerned about the "domino effect" in the region, especially in case of Iran—one of China's most important oil suppliers. Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's visit to Saudi Arabia (the first visit in the last 20 years), and to the United Arab Emirates and Qatar (the first ever visits of the PRC's premier), which took place in January, could be interpreted as means of strengthening relations with these countries, which do not have close relations with Iran and Syria but are important for China (e.g., Saudi Arabia is China's largest oil supplier).

Another dimension of the "experience" is the economic losses in Libya, not only because of internal instability and external military intervention, but also due to troubled relations with the opposition, forming the new government. The new Libyan authorities are not eager to respect contracts signed with China by deposed leaders, or to sign new ones. Chinese Minister of Commerce Chen Deming admitted that China suffered "heavy losses" in Libya. Now the PRC is striving to make an economic "return" to Libya.

Politically, Chinese vetoes are used as a vindication of China's international relevance, strength and assertiveness. Some Chinese experts argue that the PRC's behaviour in Libya has not been appreciated or even noticed by the international community. China's activities in Libya have not improved the PRC's image but caused economic problems for Beijing. Taking into account the Libyan experience, the vetoes on Syria could still bring positive effects for China, despite international condemnation. China's vetoes might be seen as a signal of China's disapproval to the actions taken by the U.S. and European states. Furthermore, China shows that the PRC could build an alliance with Russia against the United States. It is also argued in China that the situation in Syria could weaken U.S. containment actions towards Beijing, taken by the Obama administration, along with the modification of the U.S. Asia-Pacific strategy, and decrease pressure on Iran, in fact decreasing the possibility of military intervention.

Conclusions. China's reaction to the crisis in Syria differs from its reaction to events in Libya. In Libya, the PRC was concerned about 36,000 Chinese citizens working in that country. China also wanted to improve its image as a responsible power. Since regaining its UN seat in 1971, the PRC has used vetoes only ten times (including the recent three regarding Syria), using mainly abstentions in the case of the resolutions it did not support. But China, feeling outmanoeuvred by NATO in Libya, does not in the Syrian case want to be seen as a supporter of military intervention. In contrast, China would like to show other countries that they could count on the PRC in case of crisis. The fact the China's economic engagement in Syria is not as deep as in Libya gives Beijing more room for manoeuvre—supporting UNSMIS and Annan's mission but opposing UNSC resolutions. These actions are aimed at strengthening relations with some Middle East states (e.g., Iran and Saudi Arabia) and asserting China's global relevance.

Despite the failures to adopt UNSC resolutions on Syria, it seems that China, the U.S. and the states of the EU all have similar goals—to stop the bloodshed and restore stability. They are against, or at least highly reluctant to support, military intervention. The crisis in Libya showed that China could agree on sanctions. Nevertheless, in the Syrian case, the PRC's approval of sanctions is highly unlikely (on 3 August, China voted against the UN General Assembly resolution on Syria), which in turn limits the possibility to achieve consensus in the UN forum. Nonetheless, China would like to be engaged actively in humanitarian assistance (the PRC has already provided \$2 million of humanitarian aid to Syria). The international community, including EU countries, should seek to cooperate, and to coordinate humanitarian assistance for Syria with China.