



## **China's Acquiescence on UNSCR 1973: No Big Deal**

by Yun Sun

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China's abstention on the UN Security Council Resolution 1973 vote on March 17, 2011, which authorized all measures, including military action, against the Libyan government, surprised many in the West. Some believe that it represents a new direction for Chinese diplomacy, a deviation from China's traditional principle of "non-interference in other countries' internal affairs." This interpretation is based on the belief that as China's global interests expand and diversify, the internal affairs of other countries have increasingly become a concern of China's overseas, especially commercial, interests. Therefore, China is slowly moving away from its non-interference principle and the abstention on UNSCR 1973 is a manifestation of that change. A careful review of Chinese considerations suggests that reading of the abstention is too ambitious.

The claim has its merits. As China's global reach expands, it is increasingly caught between support for problematic regimes and pressure from the international community to act against them (as in the cases of Burma, North Korea, or Sudan). However, the main method Beijing has adopted to manage this difficult balance is bilateral "private communications" and "quiet persuasion." Although these might be categorized as interference in these countries' internal affairs (although subtle and behind the scenes), open criticism and pressure are rarely observed.

Nevertheless, the abstention on UNSCR 1973 is very different from these cases and doesn't support the conclusion that China is stepping away from its traditional foreign policy principles. First, exercising the veto is not a practice that China usually pursues at the Security Council. Since gaining admission to the UN in 1971, China has only exercised its veto power six times: two to support its third world "brothers," two against countries supporting Taiwan, and the other two on international sanctions against Burma and Zimbabwe, respectively. Refraining from using its veto is a conscious policy that Beijing pursues to differentiate itself from the hegemonic superpowers – the United States and the cold war era Soviet Union – and to show that Beijing aspires to solving problems and differences through diplomacy and negotiations. Beijing's veto is handy when it needs diplomatic leverage – when Beijing abstained from voting on UNSCR 678 in 1990, which authorized the use of force in the Gulf War, part of the deal was an exchange for the tuning down of Western hostility against China after the 1989 Tiananmen incident.

Second, China has tried to avoid international isolation on the UN Security Council. Both its vetoes of sanctions against

Burma (2007) and Zimbabwe (2008) were matched by similar votes by Russia. When Russia supported UNSCR 1929 on Iran and UNSCR 1874 on North Korea – both resolutions were related to their nuclear programs – that support had a major impact on China's calculations. Moreover, China's definition of international isolation also takes into consideration the attitude of regional organizations. Neither ASEAN (on Burma) nor the African Union (on Zimbabwe) was completely supportive of the UNSC draft sanction resolutions in 2007 and 2008. And in the case of UNSCR 1973, none of the key regional organizations was on Libya's side. The League of Arab States, the African Union, and the Organization of Islamic Conference all condemned the serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. This left China few options but to follow the mainstream.

China's international reputation would have been at risk had it chosen to block the resolution. It would be accused of supporting bloodshed in Libya and single-handedly sabotaging international efforts to protect Libyan civilians. Given the undeniable atrocities the Libyan government committed and the urgent need for joint action by the international community, China would become an easy target of criticism if it vetoed the resolution.

Furthermore, China sees little rationale to protect Libya other than the fact that it is a sovereign nation. Col. Gaddafi's son Saif al-Islam invited Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian to visit the country, an offer that resulted in a "stopover" in Libya in 2006, touching the most sensitive of Beijing's concerns. For China, the diplomatic insults have only escalated since then. Later in 2006, Gaddafi refused to participate in the grand Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, sending only a vice foreign minister to a summit that convened 42 heads of states/governments of the 48 participating African countries. Then in 2009, during the Fourth Ministerial meeting of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, the Libyan foreign minister lashed out at China over "the Chinese invasion of the continent," "its 'divide and rule' policy on Africa," and "betraying its African friends." These are serious and embarrassing allegations that echoed Western criticism of Beijing's approach toward Africa and created more problems for China's already troubled policy toward the continent.

All these elements contributed to China's abstention on UNSCR 1973. The international community should not over-interpret the abstention as China's full endorsement or support of the resolution. Indeed, two days after the vote, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs asserted that "we oppose the use of force in international relations and have serious reservations with part of the resolution." The specific "part of the resolution" referred to is the one that "authorizes Member States ... acting nationally or through regional organizations or arrangements, to take all necessary measures to enforce compliance with the

ban on flights...” For Beijing, a blank check that authorizes the use of “all necessary measures” (including use of force) is equivalent to unchecked authority for Western countries to take military action under the name of “humanitarianism.” Beijing’s concern is obvious and understandable: if Chinese government someday is put in the same position as Gaddafi, would this precedent be applied to China?

Therefore, no one should be surprised to see China’s tone on the military operations rapidly evolve from reservations to sharp criticism. Not only have policy analysts in Beijing accused Western countries of causing civilian casualties in the military action, but they also immediately linked such “humanitarian interventions” to charges that the West was conspiring to bring about regime change. In Beijing’s view, the case of Libya again proved that “humanitarian intervention” is a Western tool to eliminate unfriendly regimes and spread its ideology.

Beijing is pleased that more countries and organizations, including Russia, the League of Arab States, and the African Union, are expressing doubts and criticisms about the actions that were taken. China’s opposition to the military actions against Libya will likely increase in the coming days. The world should not think that China has changed or will easily change its principle of and approach to non-interference. The Libyan case offers little ground for such expectations.