

**China's New Flexibility on Foreign Intervention**  
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***Seeking global clout, China's position on sanctity of sovereignty evolves***

A single man, the fruit seller Mohamed Bouazizi sparked the Arab Spring with his self-immolation in the Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid in January 2011. Since then, leaders in Beijing have grappled with how to handle the political fallout of the democratic youthquakes reverberating across the Middle East and North Africa.

China's initial response was to advocate stability, return to normalcy and to hold high the banner of state sovereignty. This familiar spinal reaction is the logic of the five principles of peaceful co-existence laid down in 1949 by Mao Zedong as guidelines for China's foreign policy.

Yet, in the course of events in the Arab world, Beijing's stance shifted from resistance to foreign intervention to a surprising abstention on the March 2011 UN Security Council vote on Resolution 1973, which aimed to halt the Qaddafi regime's onslaught on rebel groups in Libya. Then in February 2012 China backtracked to its usual principle of non-interference and together with Russia vetoed a draft resolution to end horrific violence in Syria.

China's wobbling on intra-state conflict is puzzling to scholars and policymakers. How then can China's recent veto behavior in the Security Council be explained? Previous Chinese actions vis-à-vis the war atrocities inside Sudan provide insights. While China still cherishes the principle of state sovereignty, Beijing has actually over time become more socialized into the framework of international norms.

It's well-known that China does not condone whatsoever any criticism of Chinese policies regarding Taiwan or the regions of Xinjiang and Tibet. Less understood is under what conditions China may accept infringements on sovereignty far from its own territory. It's tempting to read China's shifting posture as purely driven by external resource dependency and capitalist expansion.

Arguably, however, the three capitals of Khartoum, Juba and Beijing have mutual vulnerabilities. The two Sudanese states, especially South Sudan, are in desperate need of investment for development. With more than US\$12.5 billion invested in the petro-sector, much of it in the disputed Abyei and South Kordofan oilfields, China has both substantial leverage and vulnerability. China's power and potential mediator role in the escalating border conflict between governments in Khartoum and Juba was illustrated by the news of a 29 April agreement that China and South Sudan had agreed on an infrastructure development package, mostly consisting of loans and investments, worth US\$8 billion – a huge figure which has not, however, been confirmed by Chinese state officials.

China's concern for stability is motivated out of pecuniary self-interest, of course, but other factors that make Beijing vulnerable also determine China's behavior on Sudan.

China cares about its reputation. In the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics,

international activists and US lawmakers branded the event as the “genocide Olympics,” pointing to China’s negligence on atrocities in the Darfur region. China acted fast. In September 2006, Beijing went out of its way to persuade the government of Sudan to accept UN Security Council Resolution 1769, thus endorsing the UN-African Union hybrid peacekeeping mission, or UNAMID. Beijing can tolerate a universalistic discourse on human rights, as shown by its statement on the Darfur crisis as a “humanitarian disaster.”

With such conflicts posing risks to Chinese lives, Beijing had little choice but to act. About 30, 000 Chinese nationals work in the oil and construction sectors in Sudan, and China’s oil operations in Southern Kordofan have come under repeated attacks since 2007. In October 2008 nine Chinese oilmen of the China National Petroleum Corporation were kidnapped. And on 28 January this year, anti-government rebels kidnapped 29 Chinese construction workers. These events and the exodus of thousands of Chinese fleeing Libya in 2011 were closely followed in real time by Chinese mass media and ordinary citizens using Twitter-like microblogs.

Therefore, alongside the value of Chinese investments in the country and pressure from both Western and Arab countries, domestic public opinion weighed heavily on Beijing’s decision not to thwart the Western-backed UN resolution on Libya, where stability was deteriorating quickly, posing imminent danger to the more than 35,000 Chinese nationals caught in civil war and subsequently evacuated in March 2011.

The oscillating veto behavior in the UN Security Council reflects China’s expanding economic engagement with the world and the effect of increasing overseas Chinese migration to all corners of the globe, including some of its most unstable and conflict-ridden parts. China’s veto actions also illustrate the necessity to accommodate demands from other state actors to shoulder broader responsibilities for safeguarding international security and recognize the emerging norm of responsibility to protect, or R2P.

Thus, several factors – some new and gaining traction – influence China’s alterations of its absolutist stance on sovereignty and non-interference.

Some trends are apparent. For China to accept intervention inside the territory of another state, the issue must go through the UN Security Council, and regional organizations must favor the actions.

Moreover, one or several of the following four questions must be answered in the affirmative: First, is there significant risk of military intervention in an area of Chinese economic influence? Second, are the level of Chinese investments and prospects of resource extraction high or promising? Third, are Chinese lives in harm’s way? Fourth, will China’s image among the community of states and in the court of worldwide public opinion be negatively affected?

In the case of Libya, China accepted intervention due its own commercial interests, the risks posed to Chinese lives, a negative fallout in world opinion and growing pressure from the West and the Arab League.

In Syria, only the last and arguably least important factor for China – an image problem – exists. Even if the Syrian intra-state conflict is highly internationalized through the

world's mass media, the indecisive Western position on R2P increases the likelihood for Beijing to stick to its traditional stance of non-intervention.

Also, the interest of veto ally Russia was a priority, compounded by a sense of "betrayal" by Western countries' interpretation of UN Security Council Resolution 1973 and their swift implementation no-fly zone over Libya by NATO members Great Britain and France.

Recent and ongoing crises in Libya, Syria and the two Sudanese states show how case-dependent China's evolving stance on both state sovereignty and non-interference has become. Clearly, China has moved away from an archconservative and principled stance on sovereignty. But its future position is not so clear-cut and could continue to evolve with China's increasing clout in world affairs and groping for new footing in staking positions on violent conflicts inside territories of other states. At times, as in the case of Libya, China's changing status may necessitate a less rigid approach to sovereignty issues. On other occasions, void of material interests and concerns for Chinese lives, the old-style rigid posture will feel more comfortable.

The implications of China's evolving position on state sovereignty may entail a more "responsible stakeholder" approach as wished for by many Western states. Beijing, however, needs to balance its perceived obstructionism against perceptions held by developing countries of Chinese acquiescence to Western hegemony. Also adding to the uncertainty is that further erosion of China's principle on sovereignty and non-interference may lead to a flexible approach that suits Beijing – but goes against national interests in the transatlantic world.

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