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Report

# China's Diplomatic Interpretations of Middle Eastern Affairs



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16 April 2013



With the recent election of the Chinese Communist Party and the inauguration the new president, Xi Jinping, Beijing has become highly active in a new diplomatic campaign. Foreign Chinese structures have mobilised a large number of academic, political and social institutions in an effort to deal with pressure on the central party to clarify its position on the Arab Spring and recent events in Syria. This has been the case especially after its United Nations Security Council veto against sanctions on the Syrian regime which led the Arabs to believe that China supports the rule of Bashar al-Assad. This was a result of the realisation that China's positions are often not well received or understood in most Arab capitals or by large segments of the Arab public in general.

Consequently, Beijing has sent several delegations to a number of Arab countries and received increasing numbers of Arab delegations. Through this, it hopes to inform Arab nations of their views and visions for the region and show an appreciation of Arab realities and their fate.(1)

### **The Chinese Arab Spring**

China's apprehension about the Arab Spring and its regional and international implications is no secret. China's conservative stance on these revolutions caused Beijing to include this portfolio in the strategy that it applies when dealing with the United States and political Islam. Chinese officials insist, despite their use of superior diplomatic language, on describing the Arab revolutions as 'disorders' and argue that the real causes are not political but internal, social and economic like slow economic development alongside rapid population growth, high unemployment rates and the

spread of corruption as well as the slow process of transformation or democratic change. However, they stress that it is the right of Arabs (i.e. both the rulers and the people) to create the form of democracy that suits them and pursue the kind of development that they desire.

From the political aspect of the revolutions, it is noted that academic and research institutions affiliated with Chinese decision makers have more freedom to express their beliefs. They perceive Arabs as contradictory and, rather than face the social problems of unemployment and corruption, regard democratisation as 'autism' and hence assert that they have thrown their countries into chaos and disorder entitled "revolution." The most that these revolutions have achieved, according to Chinese estimates, is the "freedom of mutual fighting among Egyptians," "chaos in Libya" and so forth, offering a description that accords with those most affected by the Arab revolutions rather than popular positions.

Perhaps for this reason it is not surprising that China's position on the Syrian revolution is particularly extreme, especially after the transition to "an armed conflict between the state and the armed opposition." However, Beijing does not want to raise the ire of Arab countries that support the revolution either and fears that the peoples of the region may resent it. It seems that the balance between the two resolutions lies in the search for interests, which is what led China to use its veto against the proposed sanctions on the Syrian regime.

### **Overcoming the Downfalls of the Veto without a Change of Course**

China vetoed two resolutions that were supported by the Arab League and threatened to impose sanctions on the Syrian regime. It also vetoed a third resolution put forward by Western countries under the pretext that it was one-sided and called for sanctions only against the Syrian regime.

It did not take China much time to realise that its veto had put it at a disadvantage in Arab popular opinion angered most Arab countries, especially in the Gulf. It now seeks to launch a diplomatic campaign to restore its image and win over the Arabs and gain the accompanying benefits. There are three main objectives that are of the highest significance on the Chinese agenda:

- 1 – To maintain a positive image and reputation in the Arab world, which it generally attempts to do with peoples and countries that have mutual interests, especially third world and developing countries including those in the Arab world.

- 2 – A continued supply of energy from the Arab region, particularly the Gulf, to help meet China's vast energy needs. The Arab region is one of the greatest sources of

energy in the world and China's levels of production are intrinsically dependent on energy.

3 - Continued trade and economic partnership with the Arab world. In principle, the continued growth of the Chinese economy is regarded as a necessity rather than a luxury and requires the development of economic relations with various countries, including those in the Arab world. This is always in the interest of China if we take into account that its need for oil goes in conjunction with the consumption of Chinese goods.

China does not find fault with using its veto power and its description of the Arab Spring in general. It does not see the need to change its policy toward the Syrian crisis, and relies on diplomacy and time to prove the validity of its interpretation of the events. It believes that the Arabs will eventually realise the correctness of its position and that what was done was done for their mutual interests.

### **The Creation of an Arab Understanding**

In attempt to create accord between its sanctioned policies and the damage that may occur as a result of this, China chose diplomatic rhetoric to confer a basic standard and show good intentions, hoping to gain "the Arabs' understanding" of its position so that they do not build on it negatively, which in this context confirms the following:

1 - China's position on the Arab revolution, the peak of which was the aforementioned veto, is illustrative of its principle of treating everyone equally in its foreign relations, or the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries "because intervening to change heads or regimes, especially that of Syria, allows others to interfere in our business." Its view of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, and the current Egyptian opposition also portrays non-interference. China encourages peaceful transition of power in Damascus through mutual agreement and uses Egypt, where power was peacefully transferred when former President Hosni Mubarak voluntarily stood down, as an example. The Yemeni example is also serves that purpose.

2 - China's position on both the Syrian regime and the opposition remains the same and is founded on inviting the parties to resolve their differences through dialogue rather than the use of violence. China also encourages the rejection of foreign interference in Syria. The veto was only enacted to prevent foreign intervention, not for the interest of a particular party. The Chinese claim that their position would prevent the exacerbation of the conflict, the spread of chaos and more bloodshed because ultimately the solution cannot be achieved without dialogue.

3- China's keenness to establish friendly relations with the Arabs and promote development in the region is in the interest of the Arabs as much as it is in China's, and is not linked to any external axis; the Arabs will eventually realise this.

4 - Beijing always makes note of its meetings with internal and external Syrian opposition figures while maintaining its stable relationship with the regime. Officials in its foreign department state that they have granted nearly \$ 7 million in aid to Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan as part of Beijing's anti-violence position and encouragement of a negotiated solution without any external interference.

### **The Chinese Contractor**

Ironically, China announced that it seeks to increase trade with Arab countries from around \$222 billion in 2013 to \$300 billion in 2014. This trade would mostly be with GCC countries. The irony of this is that China politically opposes most of these countries and their peoples with respect to the Arab Spring, and more specifically Syria.(2)

The policy is assisted by such a stance due to the nature of Chinese policy in general, which is based on the separation of trade and economic relations, on the one hand, and politics and ideology on the other. Thus, for example, historical tensions did not prevent China from having huge economic partnerships with the United States and Japan despite the historic rivalry it has with the two. Furthermore, such a decision was backed by the strong historical relationship between Arab states and Beijing. China's choice to use its veto regarding Syrian affairs was politically logical in as per to its aforementioned foreign policy.

### **The Cons of China's Discourse**

The Chinese insist on refuting the existence of negative repercussions of its veto. Moreover, the Arabs' poor interpretation and understanding of it produces negative results, suggesting that the Chinese may have disregarded explaining their position to their Arab friends. The refutation conflicts with the negative facts that accompanied the veto and cannot be overlooked as China's opponents will not shy away from speaking out against it. Thus, several points must be made:

1 - The veto came in the context of opposition to the Syrian regime, regardless of its intentions. It also was greatly supported by the Russian pro-Assad veto and masked Iran's vision of an axis for a solution to the situation. This is what encouraged President al-Assad to move forward with the use of violence, hence the eventual use of combined arms, including heavy armaments such as fighter planes, against protesters and rebel groups.

2 – The Chinese attempted to divert attention from the fact that their veto was against the two resolutions that were pushed for by the Arab League and most Arab states, and that it was not only against the Western resolution to impose sanctions. Also, it was not intended as foreign intervention but as "the imposition of sanctions on the regime" – and China had done this before when it agreed on the imposition of sanctions on Iran (3) – knowing that the Syrian crisis was becoming a regional issue and veritable game of chess in the international scene.

3 - China ignored the fact that its veto in the Syrian issue implied that it was moving more towards eventual intervention in the greater Middle East and that it gave negative hints about the nature of this potential intervention.

4 – China further ignored the fact that if it had abstained from veto, it would have eased the repercussions of the Russian position, which stood in favour of the Syrian regime. The Chinese veto thus came to empower the Russian veto, and together they formed a cover for Iranian intervention in Syrian affairs.

5 - China ignored the fact that Arab public opinion objected to its position and chose to deal with the situation as the pursuit for a balanced approach towards the two factions, standing on equal footing between the positions of fearful minorities that are subject to extortion by Western and regional powers and the majority of the peoples of the region.

## Conclusion

China jumped onto the Russian bandwagon by using its veto, but it now urges that Arab states and their peoples to not consider them equal to Russia in its position. It does not want hostility from the Middle East or political or economic rejection. It does not want anything to tarnish its reputation in the region and potentially pit popular voices against them.

China wants to preserve friendly relations with all Arabs persuade them to "understand" that its veto was a result of its benevolent position and in their mutual interest. It wishes to foster this perception without altering their policies or amend their courses, raising the level of trade but not becoming intertwined in the political discourses and affairs of others.

China defines the Arab revolutions according its foreign affairs vocabulary, which is cautious about linking Chinese discourse to any political or human rights issues thereby limiting the Arab revolutions and the situation in Syria in particular to internal social affairs. Terms that are political in nature like "democracy" and "change" are defined as merely economic and social.

Overall, China refuses to accept any responsibilities attributed to it as a member of the United Nations, describing itself as "the largest developing country" i.e. it is large enough to be respected and impose its interests on others but at the same time is a "developing" nation which absolves it of the responsibility to take action that may be required of other major countries.

Despite efforts to decrease the burden of China's duties and validate its rights around the world (but in the Middle East particular), the Chinese veto will continue to elicit a jolt in the history of Sino-Arab relations. There are a lot of changes taking place in the contemporary Arab world, which may make post-revolution Arabs more demanding than ever before whether of China or any other nation, and whether in the area of economics or politics. Arab nations will inevitably expect China to be more keen in the future on using the veto for their interests and will reciprocally protect China's interests in the region.

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1 – The author had met with several Chinese officials, academics and researchers in Shanghai and Beijing before writing this report.

2 - In July 2006, China agreed on Security Council Resolution No. 1696 which threatened to impose sanctions on Iran, and in December of the same year it supported Resolution No. 1737 which imposed sanctions on nuclear exports and imports to Iran. In March 2007, China supported Resolution No. 1747 which expanded the scope of sanctions to include a ban on Iranian arms exports.

3 –People's Daily Online, <http://arabic.people.com.cn/31659/7833179.html>