

China and the Arab Awakening: The Cost of Doing Business

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The popular unrest that has swept the Arab World since January 2011—occurring as China entered a period of leadership succession and delicate economic adjustment—presented Beijing with both domestic political and diplomatic challenges. This article examines how, and how well, China responded to the Arab Awakening at home and in the conduct of its diplomacy.

Keywords: Arab Awakening, China, Libya, Syria

China's economy continued to grow rapidly throughout the 2000s in spite of the global recession, surpassing Japan as the world's second-largest economy after the United States. It is not surprising that so many commentators are bullish on China, given its stunning economic achievements. Nor, in light of them, is it surprising to discover flashes of self-confident assertiveness, even brashness, in China's official statements and external policies. However, there are some indications that the era of double-digit economic growth might be coming to an end and that China could be entering a period of painful adjustment towards a more consumption-led economy (Richburg 2011a). In fact, Chinese officials face a multitude of domestic challenges, including how to absorb the growing number of university graduates into the labour market, create jobs for the swelling pool of rural migrants, respond to rising demands for accountability and transparency and manage the generational leadership change itself (Spegele and Yeoh 2011).

Underpinning China's unprecedented economic expansion is a tenuous compact between Chinese rulers and the public, and because of it, a palpable sense of insecurity that shapes the leadership's perceptions as well as its responses to external events. The political upheaval that has swept the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region

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since January 2011 has accentuated this sense of vulnerability. It has also elicited a battery of reactions from Beijing—swift and repressive internally and measured and cautious externally. This article explores how, and how effectively, China has responded to the Arab uprisings.

THE DOMESTIC FRONT—IRON FIST IN A VELVET GLOVE

The upsurge of popular discontent in Tunisia and Egypt and the rapidity with which events unfolded there caught Chinese officials flatfooted, much as it did many of their Western counterparts. Chinese censors scrambled to shape local coverage of these developments. However, the revolutions presented them with inconvenient facts: in the face of the Tunisians' overwhelming opposition to Zine El Abidine, Beijing could not credibly cast his regime as the exemplar of the 'Chinese model'. Nor could Beijing portray the protests in Egypt as Washington's handiwork, since President Hosni Mubarak was, after all, an American ally. Eventually, Chinese state media found their stride, with China's CCTV airing coverage of protests in Libya for its estimated one billion viewers. However, Chinese netizens nonetheless challenged the reporting as biased (Levenstein 2011).

Publicly, Chinese officials went to great lengths to downplay the seriousness of the uprisings and dismiss comparisons between them (*Xinhua* 2011a). However, their behaviour revealed a heightened concern about possible social unrest and the determination to pre-empt it. In a series of Internet chats, Premier Wen Jiabao promised to purge corrupt senior officials and rein in inflation and rising home prices (Richburg 2011b, 2011c). In his address at the opening of the National People's Congress (NPC), Wen declared, 'We must make improving the people's lives a pivot linking reform, development and stability ... And make sure people are content with their lives and jobs, society is tranquil and orderly and the country enjoys long-term peace and stability' (Branigan 2011a). Wen's message was echoed by other high-ranking officials. In a keynote speech at the opening of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Committee (PPCC), then Chairman Jia Qinglin conceded, 'People's livelihoods are not only an important economic and social issue, but also a major political issue' (Hang 2011). Yet, the leadership also made clear their determination to maintain the Party's monopoly on political power. In his address to the NPC, then Chairman and Party Secretary Wu Bangguo stated emphatically, 'On the basis of China's conditions, we have made a solemn declaration that we will not employ a system of multiple parties holding office in rotation' (Peh Shing Huei 2011).

Prior to the uprisings, Beijing had practiced 'selective tolerance' of Internet use. When the protests in Tunisia began, however, Chinese authorities immediately tightened Internet surveillance and control. In an apparent effort to prevent online protests from becoming actual demonstrations, Beijing blocked Internet search requests for keywords and phrases such as 'Egypt', 'Cairo' and 'Jasmine'—the last a reference to

Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution. In October 2011, the Ministry of Public Security urged police to use micro blogs to 'guide public opinion' and 'pay attention to hot topics people are talking about on the Internet'. Even more far-reaching was the creation of the State Internet Information Office (SIIO), charged with centralising the activities of a dozen government agencies, promoting 'healthy development' in Chinese cyberspace, and monitoring and controlling social networking and gaming (Moore 2011; *Washington Times* 2011). The October 2011 Central Committee communiqué reveals that the authorities have been looking for ways to increase control of instant messaging and social media tools (*Reuters* 2011a).

High-level security efforts were put into effect nationwide in cyberspace and on the streets. The measures included a massive effort in response to the posting of Internet messages calling for the launching of protests and an overwhelming show of police force in Beijing and other major cities to pre-empt/head off rallies that in fact never materialised (*Christian Science Monitor* 2011).

The uprisings gave an additional spur to the crackdown on domestic dissent as well. Following the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to imprisoned dissident Liu Xiaobo in October 2010, Chinese authorities had harassed and arrested other activists. However, as the Jasmine Revolution gathered momentum, the repression intensified. Activist-artist Ai Weiwei was one of dozens of artists, lawyers, civil society activists and bloggers who were detained or arrested from mid-February 2011 onwards (Ford 2011a; Wong 2011). Chinese authorities also took steps to inoculate the public against foreign influences. These measures included the intimidation of foreign journalists (LaFraniere and Wong 2011) as well as the cancellation of numerous cultural and other outreach activities by foreign entities, as well as conferences involving foreign participants, including the US Embassy (Wong and Ansfield 2011).

THE EXTERNAL FRONT—DAMAGE LIMITATION

China's overseas commercial interests in the MENA region have grown exponentially over the past two decades. They range from the purchase of substantial quantities of crude oil and major investments, to tens of thousands of Chinese expatriate workers. China is now Iran's number one economic partner. In 2010, China overtook the US as Saudi Arabia's leading oil customer. The same year, Chinese investment in the Arab world exceeded US\$15 billion, while Arab enterprises' investment in China was US\$2.6 billion (*Xinhua* 2011b). According to a May 2011 report, China is expected to be the most important economic partner Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries by 2020 (*Economist Intelligence Unit* 2011). The net effect of these developments is that China is more exposed to potential disruptions than in the past.

The series of uprisings across the Arab world have raised several concerns for China: i) oil supply and price stability; ii) safety of expatriate workers; iii) security of overseas investments; and iv) continued access to resources elsewhere in the wider Middle East

and throughout Africa. However, the risks posed by the Arab uprisings to Chinese interests should not be overestimated. Nor should one assume that the same level of risk applies in all cases. In fact, though China's economic ties with the Arab world as a whole have grown rapidly and are indeed extensive, the characteristics and rates of development of these relations vary by sub-region and by country. The GCC countries are the centre of gravity of Chinese economic activities in the region, largely as a result of their enormous crude oil reserves and production capacity but also because of their relatively high per capita incomes. Though the Chinese economic presence in the southern Mediterranean—where the Arab revolts began—steadily progressed during the 2000s, it is far less extensive than in the Gulf (Zallio 2011).

NORTH AFRICA

Tunisia—ignoring the uprising, adapting to the outcome

Beijing's initial reaction to the uprising in Tunisia was muted, and understandably so. After all, traditionally, Tunisia has not been a major player in the geopolitics of the wider Middle East and chiefly for this reason has been a minor factor in China's regional diplomacy. Nor were the economic stakes for China large. At the time the protests broke out, bilateral trade was modest and a mere six Chinese companies had significant investments in Tunisia (*WikiLeaks* 2010a). Furthermore, the region-wide reverberations of developments in Tunisia were not immediately evident. In addition, because events in Tunisia unfolded relatively peacefully, the issue of how to respond to them was not taken up by the UN Security Council. As a result, Chinese policymakers did not face tough choices on the diplomatic front.

None of China's leading media outlets—*People's Daily*, *China News*, *Xinhua*, or China Central Television (CCTV)—ran featured coverage of events in Tunisia. The official Chinese reaction to events in Tunisia is perhaps best represented by Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hong Lei's bland statement, 'Tunisia is China's friend. China is concerned with what is happening in Tunisia and hopes stability in the country is restored as early as possible' (*Xinhua* 2011c). After Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled the country and an interim arrangement was made, Beijing moved quickly to acknowledge the outcome, establish ties with the new unity government and dispatch Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Zhai Jun to meet with Prime Minister Beji Caid-Essebsi, where he conveyed the message that China respects the choice of the Tunisian people and announced a donation of US\$6 million for a development project to be defined later (*Xinhua* 2011d).

Egypt—seeking stability and favouring continuity

Unlike Tunisia, Egypt, the most populous country in the Arab world, traditionally has been one of the region's most influential countries and has been regarded as such by China. The economic stakes for China in Egypt are higher than in Tunisia, with

bilateral trade reaching US\$7 billion in 2010 and more than 1,000 Chinese companies investing an estimated US\$800 million there (*China Daily* 2011a). In fact, China and Egypt have developed a multifaceted relationship in recent years, including (to a modest degree) in the military sphere (Grimmett 2011).

At the same time, however, China's economic interests in Egypt should not be exaggerated. Chinese investment in Egypt is much smaller than in many other African countries. Moreover, although China was Egypt's main source of foreign investment in 2009 (Zallio 2011)—at the height of the international economic crisis—Chinese investment nonetheless represents less than 1 per cent of Egypt's stock of inward investment (*WikiLeaks* 2010b). The 27-member EU and the United States remain Egypt's predominant trade and investment partners, and the US its primary source of foreign assistance.

Chinese President Hu Jintao arrived in Cairo for a three-day state visit just two weeks before protests erupted in Tahrir Square in January 2011. When the protests began, Beijing applied its trademark approach: reaffirming its commitment to the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other nations, while expressing the desire to foster relationships based on 'mutual respect', 'equality' and 'sovereignty'. By thus assuming the role of a benign external actor, China presumably sought to distinguish itself from the United States and other major powers.

Overall, Beijing's response to the Egyptian revolution was cautious and measured. During a press conference on the sidelines of the National Peoples' Congress, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi stated, 'Despite some uncertain and destabilising factors in some areas of Africa, the overall situation on the continent is peaceful and stable' (*Xinhua* 2011e)—an overly optimistic assessment that perhaps masked Chinese leaders' apprehensions. Similarly, China reacted guardedly to President Hosni Mubarak's resignation. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Ma Zhaoxu, for example, simply expressed hope that 'the latest developments help restore national stability and social order at an early date' (quoted in Demick 2011).

The sparse coverage accorded events in Egypt by the Chinese state media continued throughout the rest of 2011. The results of the first round of parliamentary elections were reported with little, if any commentary (see *People's Daily* 2011a). Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hong Lei offered up the standard fare at a daily press briefing, stating, 'The parliamentary election is an important step in Egypt's political process, conducive to its state stability and social union' (*People's Daily* 2011b).

In lieu of issuing a slew of public statements, Beijing instead relied on quiet dialogue. In early May 2011, for instance, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi visited Egypt (and the United Arab Emirates) where he conducted separate talks with Arab League Secretary General Amr Musa, Egyptian Foreign Minister Nabil Abdallah al-Arabi and Egyptian Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) Chairman Mohamed Husayn Tantawi (*Xinhua* 2011f).

Taking the long view, Chinese officials referred to the contraction of the Egyptian economy and the dampening of investor confidence as a temporary 'setback' (Sharaawy 2011). In an apparent effort to conduct business as usual, Vice-Minister of Commerce

Fu Ziyang led a Chinese government trade and economic delegation to Cairo in April (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China 2011). In September 2011, China's largest search engine, Baidu, launched a website in Egypt, part of an effort to compete with Google internationally (Kan 2011). Meanwhile, Chinese consumer products have continued to fill Egyptian markets (Saber 2011).

Libya—the limits of pragmatism?

There was no love lost between Beijing and the Quaddafi regime. At the leadership level, Quaddafi had not visited China since 1982, while the last high-level Chinese delegation to Libya occurred in 2002. Libyan officials had been critical of China's inroads into Africa. In late 2009, Libyan Foreign Minister Mousa Kousa stated, 'When we look at the reality on the ground we find that there is something akin to a Chinese invasion of the African continent. This is something that brings to mind the effects that colonialism had on the African continent' (Hook and Dyer 2011). The same year, the Quaddafi administration turned down China National Petroleum Corporation's (CNPC) bid for Libyan oil assets held by Canadian oil enterprises.

Nevertheless, China and Libya had done business with each other. There was a significant Chinese presence in the Libyan infrastructure and services sectors. Two major Chinese companies—CNPC and China Railway Construction Company—had won large contracts in 2008. Although Libyan oil constituted just 3 per cent of Chinese oil imports, the amount had doubled between 2008 and 2010 (Spegele 2011).

Chinese officials were notably silent in the early stage of the upheaval in Libya, as in all of the uprisings. Beijing's highest priority was the safety of the approximately 36,000 Chinese nationals in Libya. As security in the country deteriorated, China's Commerce Ministry reported that 27 Chinese construction sites and camps had been attacked and looted (*Reuters* 2011a). This set in motion a large-scale evacuation effort, which was accomplished relatively smoothly and with no loss of life, thanks to a combination of chartered merchant vessels and commercial airlines and the deployment of People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) IL-76 transport aircraft and the PLA Navy (PLAN) frigate *Xuzhou*, which coordinated sea operations (Ford 2011b; Torode and Chan 2011).

Unlike in the Tunisian and Egyptian cases, however, active resistance to the government that had begun in Benghazi in mid-February 2011 quickly spiralled into a full-blown civil war. An impending humanitarian crisis and the international reaction to it tested Beijing's doctrine of 'non-interference'. France and Britain spearheaded the swift adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1970, which imposed an arms embargo, a travel ban and an asset freeze on the Libyan regime (UN Security Council 2011a)—a measure that China, however reluctantly, supported. Less than three weeks later, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1973, which effectively formed the legal basis for NATO's military intervention.¹ This marked the first time that China (by

¹ Resolution 1973 demanded an 'immediate cease-fire' and authorised the establishment of a 'no-fly zone' and all means necessary, short of foreign occupation, to protect civilians.

abstaining) elected not to block a Security Council resolution effectively authorising military measures against a government for human rights or humanitarian reasons.

In explaining the decision to abstain from voting, China's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Ambassador Li Baodong sharply revealed Beijing's delicate diplomatic balancing act:

China always opposes the use of force in international relations. During Security Council consultations on resolution 1973, China and some other Council members raised some specific issues. Regrettably, however, there is no clarification or answer to many of these issues. China has serious concerns over some elements of the resolution.

In the meantime, China attaches great importance to the decision made by the 22-member Arab League on the establishment of a no-fly zone over Libya. We also attach great importance to the positions of African countries and the African Union.' (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN 2011)

China's apprehensions proved justified. The NATO military campaign went much further than Beijing had likely anticipated or could accept. However, both the Arab League and the African Union had supported the resolution, as had the Western powers. Russia had not been prepared to use the veto while Brazil and India had decided to express their reservations by abstaining rather than voting 'no'. Further complicating matters for Beijing, the vote on Resolution 1973 had taken place with China serving as UN Security Council President for the month of March. Beijing's dilemma had been whether to place principle ahead of pragmatism. In having chosen pragmatism, Beijing avoided taking a position that would have isolated it regionally and internationally.

Following the passage of the resolution, Beijing's diplomacy quickly changed track. On 24 March, one week to the day after UNSC 1973 was issued, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi declared that China is 'deeply concerned' about civilian casualties and called for an immediate ceasefire in Libya (Cruz-Del Rosario and Phillie 2011). In remarks carried by the Chinese state media, President Hu Jintao admonished visiting French President Nicolas Sarkozy, stating, 'if the military action brings disaster to innocent civilians, resulting in an even greater humanitarian crisis, then that is contrary to the original intention of the Security Council resolution' (*China Daily* 2011b). There followed pointed Chinese criticism of the NATO intervention (*China Daily* 2011c). Lu Shaye, Director-General of the Department of African Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, hit back at allegations that Beijing supports authoritarian regimes in Africa, including Libya, arguing that, 'The former African leaders who are now deemed as dictators by the West, including Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and [Zine el-Abidine] Ben Ali of Tunisia, were all firm allies of the West over the past two to three decades' (Ng 2011).

Throughout the Libyan conflict and, as will be shown, in other cases, China sought to align its position to the extent possible with regional players. For example, Chinese

President Hu Jintao reportedly told South African President Jacob Zuma that China was keen to work with the African Union (AU) in ‘finding a solution to the Libya crisis’ (Chacko 2011; *Xinhua* 2011g). Elaborating on China’s position, Hu stated, ‘South Africa and the African Union have played an important role in pushing a political solution for the Libyan issue’, which shows the resolve of African countries to ‘use an African method to solve an African issue ... China greatly appreciates this, and is willing to continue remaining in close touch and coordinate closely with South Africa and the African Union on the Libya issue’ (*Reuters* 2011b).

Whether reverting to a strict non-interventionist posture, suspicious of Western motives, or simply hedging its bets, China, like Russia, initially distanced itself from the Libyan Contact Group (LCG).² For example, China declined Turkey’s invitation to participate in the LCG meeting in Istanbul, with spokesperson Hong Lei stating that Beijing would not send a representative to the meeting ‘because the function and method of operation of this contact group need further study’ (Küçükkoşum 2011). However, as the conflict evolved, so too did China’s posture toward the Libyan opposition. At the May 2011 G-8 summit, China was placed in an awkward position by Russia’s shift from silent support of the Quaddafi regime to open support of the opposition. China’s approach was to initiate contacts with the Libyan opposition while keeping the door open to the Quaddafi camp. In June and July, delegations from the Benghazi Interim Government visited Beijing. Meanwhile, China also dispatched its Director-General of Asian and African Affairs to cultivate allies within the Libyan opposition (Lee 2011).

Beijing delayed for as long as possible severing ties with the Quaddafi regime, which strained its relations with the National Transitional Council (NTC). Further souring the relationship was the recovery of invoices from Libyan government files revealing that Chinese arms companies had offered to sell US\$200 million worth of weapons to the regime (Branigan 2011b; Walker 2011). The NTC also accused Beijing of holding up the release of frozen funds held overseas in order to first guarantee the safety of billions of dollars in Chinese investments in Libya (*Telegraph* 2011).

When the Quaddafi regime finally collapsed, the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a press release stating simply that Beijing respected ‘the choice of the Libyan people’ (Higgins 2011). Beijing then adjusted its diplomacy to reflect the new political reality by formally recognising the Transitional National Council (TNC) on September 12—becoming the last permanent member of the UN Security Council to do so (Denyer and Fadel 2011).

Beijing also urged joint international efforts under the auspices of the United Nations to assist Libya’s post-conflict transition and recovery and pledged that China

²The LCG was formed in London on 29 March under the auspices of the United Kingdom. Its declared mission was to ‘support and be a focal point of contact with the Libyan people, coordinate international policy and be a forum for discussion of humanitarian and post-conflict support’ (Hague 2011). However, some commentators have argued that a key purpose of the formation of the LCG was to bypass the UN Security Council and thus minimise the risk that China and/or Russia might obstruct their efforts (see for example, Lee 2011).

would play an active role in such endeavours (*China Daily* 2011c). While participating in the UN High-Level Meeting on Libya in New York on 26 September, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi declared China's support for the United Nations to play the leading role in Libya's post-war reconstruction and for the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) (*China Daily* 2011b). In fact, China voted in favour of UN Security Council Resolution 2009, which authorised the creation of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) for an initial period of three months (*China Daily* 2011b) and later voted to extend the authorisation and expand UNSMIL's mandate (UNSC Res. 2022) (UN Security Council 2011b).

THE GULF AND ARABIAN PENINSULA

As previously stated, the economic stakes for China are far higher in the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula, than in North Africa. Here, two cases—Yemen and Bahrain—are illustrative of the extent to which political unrest has placed Chinese interests at risk. While with respect to Yemen, Beijing's uneasiness stems from the possibility that unrest there might disrupt China's global maritime commerce, with respect to Bahrain it emanates from the concern that disorder there might fuel sectarian strife or otherwise foster instability throughout the Gulf region.

Before 1979, when China's foreign policy was more ideologically oriented, Beijing had enjoyed good political relations with Yemen. Since 1979, with the increasingly prominent place that trade and commerce have occupied in China's external relations globally, Yemen's importance in China's Middle East diplomacy has measurably declined. Nevertheless, Yemen remains significant for China primarily due to its geo-strategic location. Most of China's trade with Europe (about 25 per cent of total exports) travels through the Bab al-Mandeb, the waterway that separates Yemen from Djibouti, which in recent years has been threatened by piracy. Violent upheaval, including the possibility that Yemen, like Somalia, might become a failed state, could place Chinese commercial interests further at risk.

The unrest in Bahrain arguably has been of even greater geopolitical significance and thus more problematic for China than the political upheaval in Yemen. Continued turmoil in Bahrain poses the danger of exacerbating sectarian tension in neighbouring countries and, related to it, further fuelling the regional rivalry between the GCC states (chiefly Saudi Arabia) and Iran. Following month-long protests that had commenced on 14 February and were met immediately with force by Bahraini security services, Saudi Arabia dispatched about 1,000 troops there to disperse demonstrators and thereby help defend the regime. Since then, Bahrain's ruling family has vacillated between repression and reconciliation.

China reacted circumspectly to the protests in Bahrain, as it did in the cases of Tunisia and Egypt. In her regular press conference on 17 March, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Jiang Yu stated, 'We hope that all the relevant parties in Bahrain can begin nationwide discussions quickly, and restore peace and stability through dialog

and peaceful means as soon as possible' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2011). China applauded King Hamad's call for an independent fact finding commission to investigate the causes of the unrest and expressed support for peaceful dialogue (*Xinhua* 2011h). When, in November, the Bahrain Independent Commission Inquiry report was released (Bahrain Independent Commission Inquiry 2011), King Hamad pledged reforms and an end to impunity (Black 2011)—though many in the Bahraini opposition remain sceptical (Bakri 2012). China welcomed the King's comments and expressed the hope that the parties would settle their differences peacefully (*Xinhua* 2011i).

There are two noteworthy aspects to China's response to the upheaval in Bahrain. The first aspect pertains to China's recognition of the vital importance and vulnerabilities of Saudi Arabia. For China, the stability of Saudi Arabia is of paramount concern due to the latter's key role in the global oil market and as a major source of Chinese oil imports (Canty 2010). Perhaps more than any other factor, this explains China's tacit approval of Saudi Arabia's intervention in Bahrain and earlier military incursions into Yemen.

The second aspect relates to China's apparent determination to promote its long-term economic interests in Bahrain despite heightened short-term political and market uncertainty. Before the unrest began, Chinese officials had been engaged with their Bahraini counterparts in mapping out ways to expand bilateral and region-wide economic ties. Towards that end, the first GCC–China Economic Forum was convened in Manama in March 2010 (Canty 2010). Barely a month before the unrest began a Chinese trade delegation had visited Bahrain. Notwithstanding the unsettled situation in Bahrain, China's commercial diplomacy continued with the arrival of a trade delegation in mid-December led by Ningxia province Deputy Director Trade Zhang Xiu (*Daily Tribune* 2011). Here, it should be mentioned that Bahraini officials have reciprocated this interest, keen as they are to increase the presence of Chinese enterprises in the country as part of a broader effort to attract Asian investment and position Bahrain as a regional financial centre. In the words of Esam Abdulla Fakhro, Chairman of the Bahrain Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 'We expect Chinese enterprises will use Bahrain as a centre for the Gulf region' (Ding 2011).

SYRIA

The protest suppression dynamic in Syria bears some resemblance to the Libyan case, particularly the mounting civilian death toll and as a consequence, the intensive diplomatic engagement of the Arab League and growing anxiety and frustration among many of its members. Yet, the situation in Syria has many distinctive attributes, not least the conflict's potentially explosive sectarian dimension and the fact that its outcome has far-reaching implications for the balance of power in the Levant and the region as

a whole. In addition, this case, perhaps more than any other, brings into sharp focus China's struggle to balance its interests.

Ten weeks after protests began in the city of Daraa, Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal al-Mekdad travelled to Beijing for meetings with Chinese officials. On the occasion of the visit, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Jiang Yu stated, 'Syria is an important nation in the Middle East and its stability concerns the security and stability of the region as a whole' (*Xinhua* 2011j). In response to a reporter's question, she added, 'Syria's future should be decided by its people' (*Xinhua* 2011k). However, when the issue of Syria was broached in the UN Security Council, China stood firmly with Russia, blocking a UN Security Council resolution in July that condemned the Assad regime's crackdown on protesters (Spencer 2011). Even revised language failed to win China's support, indicative of the fallout from the Libyan case (that is, the belief that the civilian protection justification had been used as a pretext for regime change) (Bilefsky 2011).

Throughout the latter half of 2011, China and Russia continued to work in tandem to counter US and European efforts in the UN Security Council to increase pressure on the Assad regime. They boycotted initial talks in August on a proposal to impose sanctions on the regime (*Agence France-Presse* 2011). Later, they worked to dilute the original draft, which called for targeted financial sanctions against President Bashar al-Assad and an arms embargo on Syria. Seeking to shield Syria from Western sanctions and limit American intrusion, both cast vetoes against a resolution that merely called for the Council to 'consider' unspecified 'measures' after a 30-day period. The Chinese delegation and its Russian counterpart argued that the UN resolution authorising the use of force to protect civilians in Libya had been misused by NATO to justify months of air strikes (*Associated Press* 2011b; Lynch 2011).

With Vladimir Putin returning to the spotlight, Russia presented its own draft resolution calling for 'the immediate cessation of all acts of violence'. Russia was also out in front in adjusting policy when, following the veto, it faced harsh criticism by the West (Lynch 2011) and angry Syrian protesters who burned Russian and Chinese flags in the streets of Damascus. Syrian National Council spokesperson Basmah al-Qadamani expressed indignation, saying, 'we deeply regret the obstruction of the condemnation draft resolution in the UNSC due to the Russian and Chinese vetoes. We consider it a very big strategic mistake and a momentous historic mistake in view of the message that the international community is sending' (Al-Qudsi and Istih 2011).

These recriminations appeared to lead Beijing to change the tone, though not the substance of its approach to Syria. This was evident in an 11 October Foreign Ministry statement: 'We believe the Syrian government should move faster to honour its reform pledges and swiftly start to push forward the inclusive political process with the broad participation of all parties in Syria' (*Gulf Times* 2011). Similarly, during a 25 October press briefing, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Jiang Yu stated, 'We believe the Syrian government should deliver on its reform pledges, respond to the people's appeals and that all parties should, in a constructive manner, actively participate in the political process' (*Associated Press* 2011a).

On the diplomatic front, China has sought to defer to the Arab League while aligning its position in the UN Security Council with Russia. However, these two elements of China's approach have become increasingly difficult to harmonise. Unlike in the Libyan case, where the Arab League rather quickly abandoned the Quaddafi regime, its members showed more forbearance, holding out hope for a Syrian 'reform process' to materialise. The position of the Arab League, particularly Saudi Arabia, undoubtedly factored into China's calculations regarding how to calibrate its own response to the turmoil. During a 27 October news conference in Damascus, Wu Sike, China's Envoy to the Middle East stated, 'China supports the efforts made by the Arab League to make Syria launch a comprehensive political process whose contribution is wide in order to avoid foreign intervention' (*Xinhua* 2011).

The official Chinese position paralleled that of Russia. One week after having cast the veto in the Security Council, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev stated that Syria's leaders should step down if they cannot enact reforms, but warned the West not to try to push President Bashar al-Assad from power (*BBC News* 2011). Prime Minister Vladimir Putin called for Assad to 'reform or resign'. Describing Moscow's intention to circulate its own UN Security Council resolution, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, 'We propose to adopt a balanced resolution that would condemn violence from both sides' (*The National* 2011). Although Chinese leaders tended to be more cautious and discreet than their Russian counterparts, Beijing nonetheless threw its support behind a draft resolution by Russia that was sharply critical of the Assad regime (*Reuters* 2011c).

However, the violence in Syria continued to escalate, revealing the limitations of the Arab League monitoring mission and leading to its suspension. The level of violence also brought to a head the debate within the UN Security Council as to how to proceed, which culminated in the tabling of an Arab–European draft resolution condemning the violence perpetrated by the Syrian government and endorsing the Arab League plan for Assad to yield power (Lauria and Levinson 2012). Although the text did not authorise sanctions or the use of force, China, for the second time in four months, joined Russia in casting a veto.

International reaction to the veto ranged from 'disappointment' to 'outrage'. Burhan Ghalioun, head of the opposition umbrella Syrian National Council, described the veto as 'a new license to kill from these two capitals...' (Logan and Worsnip 2012). King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia sharply criticised the veto, though without referring to China and Russia by name (Gladstone 2012). The veto was widely condemned in the Arab and the Turkish press as well. Indeed, the action found support only in the Chinese, Iranian and Syrian official media (*BBC News* 2012). China's embassy in Tripoli was attacked by a mob of Syrian activists and Libyan sympathisers (*Voice of Russia* 2012)—the first tangible evidence of what could eventually prove to be a more serious backlash.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Liu Weiman defended the vote, contending that 'the countries that proposed the resolution forced a vote despite the serious

differences among various sides, and this approach was not conducive to the unity and authority of Security Council and is not conducive to the appropriate resolution of the problem' (Buckley 2012). An editorial in *People's Daily* invoked the spectre of Libya (*People's Daily* 2012). Yet, Chinese officials took damage-limiting measures, including—reminiscent of the Libyan case—meeting with opposition forces (that is, a representative of the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change [NCB] in Syria) and insisting that they have not ruled out future cooperation on Syria (Boden 2012). Several weeks later, China sought to narrow the gap between its position and that of leading Arab League members such as Saudi Arabia, together with Russia, expressing support for the mediation efforts of former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan (*Agence France-Presse* 2012).

CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS

The year 2011 in the Middle East proved to be much more tumultuous than anyone could have anticipated. The new Arab (dis-)order that began in Tunisia and spread across the region has yet to yield a clear outcome either within those countries which have experienced unrest or in the regional balance of power. Nevertheless, the events of the past year have produced some unmistakable preliminary results. First, several seemingly unshakable authoritarian regimes have fallen. Second, the political forces that have thus far gained ascendancy in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia have distinctly Islamist orientations. Third, all of the revolutions have fallen short of their goals.

Indeed, the prevailing climate throughout the region is one of political instability and economic uncertainty. A struggle between pro-democracy forces and the military looms in Egypt. Renewed militia-led conflict in Libya is a distinct possibility. The processes of reform and reconciliation in Bahrain have not begun in earnest. The GCC-brokered transfer of power in Yemen, whose economy is on the verge of collapse, could yet unravel. Vigorous diplomacy by the Arab League has not succeeded in fostering a political settlement in Syria or causing the violence there to abate. The situation in Iraq is also fraught—in the wake of the US military withdrawal, political tensions have intensified, accompanied by a spate of deadly bombings. Meanwhile, the war of words between Washington and Tehran has escalated and the EU-27 foreign ministers have joined the US in imposing an oil embargo on Iran and freezing the assets of its central bank.

China is not impervious to these pressures. Indeed, the stakes for China—primarily a function of its growing economic presence globally and in particular, its increasingly extensive economic ties with the region—are higher than ever. They range from the stability of oil supplies and prices to the safety of Chinese nationals and the security of Chinese companies' investments abroad. Additionally, the turmoil in the Middle East and North Africa is occurring at the very time when developments elsewhere,

including the Euro-crisis, are roiling the global economy and when China itself is about to enter a transitional period marked by a leadership succession and a delicate economic adjustment.

The Arab Awakening has presented the Chinese leadership with both domestic political and diplomatic challenges. At the domestic level, the challenge has been to prevent the Arab uprisings from having a 'demonstration effect'. At the regional and international levels, the Awakening has tested China's traditional adherence to the principle of 'non-interference' and has complicated its diplomacy. Beijing's efforts to forestall possible domestic protests were immediate, systematic and repressive. In reacting to the uprisings in the diplomatic arena, Beijing appears to have taken the view that China's future relationship with the state is ultimately more important than its ties with a particular regime. Accordingly, Chinese officials have worked assiduously to keep all options open in order to limit the damage to China's long-term economic interests.

There is little indication that the Awakening has contributed to a weakening of the Chinese leadership's grip on power. Nor is there evidence that the unrest in the Middle East or Beijing's responses to it has substantially undermined Chinese economic interests. In fact, the Arab Awakening could ultimately provide a window of strategic opportunity for China to expand its economic presence and political influence in the region. After all, post-autocratic regimes are likely to be more pluralistic and practice a different style of statecraft than did their predecessors and are thus less inclined to be, or to be seen as, Western clients. Indeed, whoever holds the reins of power will surely want to engage China economically while many Chinese companies will undoubtedly seek to leverage their strengths, particularly in infrastructure construction.

China's tactical adjustments in response to the turmoil in the Middle East appear to have paid off, at least for the time being. But the transformation of the region has only just begun. There is growing resistance to authoritarian regimes in the Arab world, not to mention in Russia. China's leaders are likely to confront crises they cannot anticipate or prevent, and outcomes they can neither predict nor decisively shape. Try as they might to inoculate their public, news of developments in the Middle East and China's policy responses can be filtered but not shut out. And try as they might to shield their interests abroad, more will be expected, indeed demanded, of them. One thing is certain: siding with authoritarianism is no longer a safe bet. That is the cost of doing business.

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