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Change and Continuity in Chinese Foreign Policy:
China's Engagement in the Libyan Civil War as a Case Study.

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ABSTRACT.

With the rapid proliferation of Chinese interests and responsibilities in the world in recent years, the non-interference principle in Chinese diplomacy has in some ways been called into question. This article will analyse subtle alterations in Chinese foreign policy by exploring the Chinese reaction to Libya Crisis of 2011. It concludes that China will continue to adhere to the non-interference principle in future, but some flexible and 'soft' involvement in the domestic affairs of foreign countries may be deployed to protect national interests.

I. CHINA'S ECONOMIC ENGAGEMENT IN LIBYA BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR.

It is a truism that a state's economic interests in other countries will deeply affect that state's foreign policy, political as well as economic. A comprehensive understanding of China's reaction during and after Libya's civil war requires an exploration of China's economic relations with Libya before the war broke out in 2011.

In 1978, when China and Libya first established formal diplomatic relations, they signed two economic agreements – a bilateral trade agreement and a cooperative agreement on science and technology, – which entered into force in 1982 (Liang De, 1993). In addition to these agreements, the two countries formed a working mechanism at the same time, the Libya-China Joint Committee, which enabled, for example, the successful convening of several top level workshops on economic and technological cooperation.

Based upon these institutional arrangements and economic linkages, trade and financial relations developed quite rapidly. In 1992, due to the fallout from the Lockerbie Aerial Incident, Libya was strongly motivated to strengthen trade relations with China to counteract the sanctions imposed by the UN. As a result China-Libya trade volume reached a historical peak of US\$175 billion in that year. Yet after 1994 the volume declined – (for example, it was only US\$77.37 billion in 2000) – because of the negative effect of the sanctions on Libya which had begun to subvert China-Libya trade, while at the same time the price of crude oil also fell. At that point oil was the principal good in the Libya-to-China trade flow. By 2007 this situation had been reversed, with bilateral trade volume reaching an unprecedented US\$2.4 billion, and doubling to US\$5.17 billion as at 2009. China had become a very important trade partner of Libya, with mechanical and electrical equipment, construction machinery, telecommunication equipment, textiles and consumer goods being the main exports from China to Libya, while mainly crude oil was exported from Libya to China (Xinhua News, 2001).

Besides official trade relations, beginning in 1981 Chinese enterprises have tentatively penetrated the Libyan market, especially in the field of construction. Nevertheless, compared to the volume of trade, Chinese investment in Libya in 1980s was not that significant. After 2000, however, Chinese investment began to expand in two fields – energy and contract works. All three of China's state-owned oil companies – CNPC, Sinopec and CNOOC – have done business in Libya since then. For instance, not only CNPC but also CNOOC had subsidiaries in Libya. The Pipeline Bureau of CNPC had been undertaking oil and gas pipeline projects since 2002, while the International Engineer Company of CNOOC was in charge of related business in one Libyan oil field after winning a bid in 2005.

Chinese investment in Libyan oil should not be exaggerated, however; it was quite small compared to that of Western companies. Moreover, in due course Chinese efforts to invest in Libyan oil and gas encountered resistance from Libya. For instance, CNPC's bid for Verenex Energy was rebuffed by the Libya government in September 2009. Chinese oil and gas operations employed only about 400 Chinese nationals – a small scale for Libya. Before the civil war the key investors in Libyan oil were from the West: ENI (Italy), Occidental (USA), Petro-Canada and BP (UK), Hess (USA), Marathon (USA), Conoco-Phillips (USA), Chevron Texaco (USA) and others. Italy, Germany, Spain and France have been the major markets for Libya's oil exports. According to International Energy Agency statistics, as at 2010 only 3 percent of Libya's total oil exports went to China, while Europe got over 85 percent (Peng Ligu, 2011).

Besides the oil sector, the other sector of the Libyan economy that China was heavily invested in was contract works, especially infrastructure, such as construction of railways, power stations, airports, blocks of flats, schools and governmental buildings, telecommunications plant, and so on. According to the China International Contractors Association (CHINCA), Libya became China's third-ranking partner in the world in terms of newly signed overseas contract works projects.

In 2009 alone 406 new contracts valued at US\$5.841 billion were signed between Chinese companies and Libya, and 24,000 Chinese labourers were working in Libya by the end of that year. Amongst the larger projects were the coastal railway line extension by the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation, the Saika Ha and Braque university campuses by Hubei Province's Industrial Construction Group Co., Ltd, and the transformation-of-old-cities project by Gezhouba Group Co., Ltd. Additionally, some world-renowned private enterprises, such as ZTE and Huawei, were also invested in Libya, especially in the telecommunications field.

Thus, by 2009 China's Ministry of Commerce could estimated that Chinese capital investment in Libya amounted to US\$426.9 billion. By March 2011, when the civil war broke out, a total of 75 Chinese enterprises, including 13 central government-owned/-operated companies, were invested in Libya and involved in 50 contract works projects valued at about US\$18.8 billion and employing 36,000 Chinese labourers (Securities Times, 2011).

However, the importance for China of its investment in Libya should not be overestimated, as the amounts in question hardly stand out in comparison with its investments in other African countries, let alone the amount of Western investment in Libya. According to China's Commerce Ministry, the African countries receiving the most Chinese investment in 2010 were the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Algeria, South Africa and Angola. Libya was

less important than all of these (Diao Xiaoqiong, 2012). Furthermore, most Chinese enterprises in Libya had no direct investment in the country. Chen Deming, then Minister of China's Commerce Ministry, remarked that China hadn't a penny (directly) invested in Libya before the civil war. This was confirmed by Ministry spokespersons, who stated that Chinese enterprises were not involved in FDI in Libya, except for contract works projects.

Chinese companies' investment in Libya pre-civil war.

Companies	State-owned/ private	Investment Projects	Investment volume
China Gezhouba Corporation	State-owned	Housing project	About US\$5.54 billion
CSCEC	State-owned	Housing project	About ¥17.6 billion
China Railway Construction Engineering Corporation	State-owned	Extending coast railway, South-North railway and West-East railway	US\$4.237 billion
CNPC	State-owned	Six projects in the making	US\$1.788 billion
China Metallurgical Co., Ltd.	State-owned	Housing project in East Melita, EPC, and the civil engineering project of Misurata Cement Factory	¥5.131 billion-valued project (incomplete)
China Building Materials Co., Ltd.	State-owned	Cement plant and installation project	US\$0.15 billion
The Chinese 15MCC Construction Co., Ltd.	State-owned	Five subsidiaries in Libya	-
China Water Conservancy and Hydropower Construction Corporation	State-owned	FWAM and NALOUT projects	-
CCCC	State-owned	-	US\$4.8 billion
China Industry Corporation	State-owned	-	US\$4 billion
CNPC	State-owned	-	US\$0.38 billion
ZTE	private	Telecom project	US\$92.7million
Huawei	private	FTTH project	US\$40 million
Beijing Hongfu Company	private	Building 5000 houses and their facilities (signed in 2009)	About ¥3.4 billion
Ningbo Century Huafeng	private	Housing project	¥3.354 billion

Source: Sohu, Inc. 2011, A List of Chinese Enterprises' Investments in Libya. Available at: <<http://business.sohu.com/20110823/n317112596.shtml>>, [Accessed 23 August 2015]

When the civil war broke out in earnest in March 2011, the Chinese government had already begun evacuating in late February the 36,000 Chinese workers, managers and private businessmen then in Libya, an operation that was complete by early March. This meant that all signed contract projects had had to be stopped, or at least postponed, due to the domestic unrest in Libya.

Undoubtedly, Chinese enterprises were seriously damaged by this conflict and by the suspension of business, but above all, by the loss of fixed assets. Although most Chinese companies were not directly invested in Libya, they had many fixed assets there, such as headquarters for research and business operations, infrastructure dedicated to contract projects, and in-country materials and equipment. All of them slipped from the control of Chinese companies during the civil conflict.

In addition, earned profits and pre-paid costs for projects were not compensated in this political crisis. In addition, Chinese enterprises and government were obliged to deal with the predictable dislocations that happen when one's contract projects are put on hold. For example, labourers' return flights had to be re-arranged, and their re-employment resolved. Moreover, enterprises were sometimes confronted with unfair claims by Libyans. For instance, Libya Sahara Bank sued Gezhouba Corporation, the Water Conservancy and Hydropower Construction Corporation, Hongfu Construction Engineering Company, etc. for unmerited recovery (Sohu, Inc., 2011).

In September 2011 Beijing became the last member of UNSC to recognise the National Transitional Council (NTC) as the legitimate authority in Libya in the post-Gaddafi era. Soon after, the NTC promised to recognise the validity of all contracts signed between China and the Gaddafi regime. China also sent diplomats to Paris to attend "The Friends of Libya" – to help Libya reconstruct after the civil war.

After discussions between the new regime and Beijing between 4 and 8 February 2012, a Chinese working group consisting of the Ministry of Commerce, the International Contractors Association, and those enterprises with large investments in Libya visited Libya to survey the damage to their assets and to discuss with the new authorities their possible return to Libya (International Business Daily, 2012). Unfortunately, except for a few cases it has been far from clear that Chinese enterprises can seamlessly re-enter Libya, owing to their divergent political views about the Gaddafi regime as well as to the terms for

projects-resumption that the new regime imposed, according to which Chinese enterprises may resume, but unconditionally, implying that they would receive no compensation (Chinese Foreign Affairs Ministry, 2012).

In reality, only a few companies like Huawei and ZTE, two private giants in the Chinese telecom market, resumed business operations in Libya; many others, especially in construction engineering, are still in suspension. A few teams consisting of technologists, agents and managers, but not workers have returned Libya to undertake preparatory work for future business. The China Communications Construction Company Limited, for example, involved in five projects in Libya before the civil war, has been sending preparatory teams since October 2011 (Jiao Xiang, 2012).

In sum, after the end of the civil war, it was not clear that Chinese enterprises could successfully return to Libya, resume their contract projects and start new investments. This indicates that at that time China didn't have a robust capability to protect its economic interests in Libya.

II. THE ALTERATION OF CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD LIBYA DURING THE CIVIL WAR.

China's foreign policy towards Libya during the changing circumstances both internationally and domestically experienced three major shifts, from neutrality at the beginning, a hedging strategy through contact with the Libyan rebels and finally a formal recognition of the NTC.

II.1. China maintained its neutrality at the beginning of the civil war.

When civil war in Libya broke out, Beijing maintained its neutrality: it neither followed the West in bombing troops loyal to Gaddafi nor supported the Tripoli regime. It stood by, uttering platitudes through spokespersons of the Foreign Ministry.

In the template of Chinese foreign policy one basic principle is non-interference, based on the UN Charter's support for the sovereign independence of all member states. In Beijing's opinion, the civil war between the Tripoli regime and the Benghazi rebels should allow no intervention by foreign powers without UN authorisation, and should be resolved mainly by the Libyan people, as Foreign Ministry spokespersons repeatedly declared.

Neutrality gave rise to Beijing's usual position toward conflicting parties – treating both sides

equally. This is verified in the case of the humanitarian assistance provided by the Chinese Red Cross. On 19 August China delivered humanitarian supplies, including rice, oil and medicines, to Benghazi Airport for provision to the rebels. Ma Jianchun, Counsellor of the Chinese Embassy in Egypt, who was in charge of these transfers to Libya, said at the airport that there was no political intention to deliver the supplies to either the western or the eastern fronts in Benghazi, and that similar humanitarian supplies would also be delivered to Tripoli shortly. According to him, both the Tripoli regime and the Benghazi rebels would receive humanitarian aid from China.

From the beginning of the crisis but before it ended, the Chinese government took a neutral stance, adhering to its basic principle in international relations – non-interference; meanwhile undertaking responsibility for humanitarian aid.

II.2. Neutrality was hedged by contact with the rebels.

Neutrality in Libya's crisis was subtly altered as the NATO-supported rebels gained more and more ground on the battlefield. In principle, Tripoli was the sole legitimate authority in Libya when the civil war broke out, as far as Beijing was concerned, since it was still admitted by the UN and, in fact, China did maintain its formal relations with it. But as the collapse of Gaddafi's rule became more ineluctable, Beijing began to put out feelers to the rebels.

On June 8 in Beijing, for example, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi met with Abdelati Obeidi, Secretary of the General People's Committee for Foreign Liaison and International Cooperation of Libya, who also acted as the Tripoli regime's special envoy to China, in order to "discuss the current situation in Libya and exchange views on the resolution of the crisis".

On the next day, however, Chen Xiaodong, Director of the Foreign Ministry's Northwest Asia and Africa Division, said in an interview by the Chinese media that China intended to keep in contact with the Benghazi-based National Transitional Council of Libya. To this end, Beijing would invite representatives of the rebels to China, Chen said. Moreover, he stressed that to pave the way for a political resolution of the crisis, China had intensified its efforts to bring all parties in the conflict into dialogue.

Indeed, according to a Foreign Ministry spokesperson, even before the Tripoli delegation's visit to Beijing, Chinese Ambassador to Qatar Zhang Zhiliang had met with Mustafa Abdel

Jalil, the Chairman of the Benghazi Transitional Council. And Li Lianhe, the Minister-Counsellor of the Chinese Embassy in Egypt, visited Benghazi ostensibly “to learn about the humanitarian situation and the fate of Chinese state-companies there”; at the same time, however, he was making contact with leaders of the Transitional Council (Jian Junbo, 2011).

The analysis must be that, while the civil war was ongoing, Beijing acted conservatively, treating Tripoli as the legitimate regime of all Libya; and yet, as the fortunes of war turned, Beijing started to prepare for the coming to power of the National Transitional Council (NTC). By the end, it had quietly altered its neutral stance in favour of a hedging policy that clearly crossed over its own red line – non-interference in a sovereign state’s internal affairs.

This alteration is absolutely consistent with China’s intention to safeguard its national interests. Neutrality was good policy while the civil war was ongoing and unresolved, because all Chinese in Libya had left for China through Chinese government-supported air transport before hostilities were well under way. A limited war would not have significantly affected China’s interests in Libya. If Gaddafi won, China’s interests would be secure, as China would not have followed the West in supporting the rebels against him. Neutrality implied reciprocal good will from Gaddafi if he defeated the rebels. Yet as the war escalated and the rebels’ victories threatened the destruction of Gaddafi’s rule, it became clear that neutrality would not suffice to preserve China’s interests in Libya, given the number of incomplete construction projects left in Libya and the possibility of winning a share of the reconstruction contracts after the end of the war. If the new owners of Libya took an unfriendly stance toward China or even punished China for its coolness toward the NTC during the war, the value of China’s construction projects might be lost if the rebels refused to recognize their legal validity of the contracts signed with the Gaddafi regime. Accordingly, a hedging stance in lieu of its obsolete neutrality was adopted by Beijing to protect China’s interests in tandem with changes in the battlefield situation.

II.3. The alteration of China’s attitude toward the NTC.

The hedging policy did not mean the NTC was to be recognized immediately by Beijing as the single legitimate regime of Libya. What it did mean was that Beijing preferred a flexible approach to any oblique involvement in Libya’s civil war.

When the outcome of the civil war became foreseeable, Beijing nevertheless maintained an ambiguous stance on the NTC's legitimacy. Even after Russia had recognized the NTC as the sole legitimate authority in Libya following the US, UK and France, Beijing asseverated that China's recognition of the legitimacy of the rebel government in Tripoli should only be forthcoming after conditions had matured. China did not recognise the NTC's legitimacy until 12 September, once conditions sufficiently mature in Beijing's eyes had been forthcoming.

In the communication that informed the NTC of China's decision to recognise its legitimacy, Beijing declared that China respects the choice of the Libyan people, highly values NTC's important position and role (in Libya), and wishes to maintain contact with it. It also confirmed that China hopes the new regime will continue to honour the contracts China signed with Gaddafi and will actually put them into practice. As the last member of the UN Security Council to recognise their legitimacy, of course the heads of the NTC were glad to hear of China's decision and welcomed its participation in Libya's reconstruction (Chinese Foreign Affairs Ministry, 2011).

The rebels broadcast mixed signals, however, on China's role in Libya in the post-civil war period. Abdul Hafiz Ghoga, then vice-president of the NTC, said he hoped China would play a role in Libya's reconstruction and praised China-Libya cooperation. After the 42-year rule of Gaddafi, Libya needs China more than ever, Ghoga added (Li Zhi, 2011). On the other hand, one NTC spokesperson vowed that the new regime's disposition of new contracts with foreign countries would be based on their contribution to Libya's regime change. That hinted that China perhaps would be punished economically by the new regime.

One episode between Beijing and NTC should be mentioned. In an UN conference after the civil war ended, China declined to release part of Libya's frozen overseas funds. At a subsequent news conference on 3 September, Chairman Jalil of the NTC charged Beijing with intent to use the funds as a bargaining chip, but asked the NTC to protect China's interests in Libya. Whatever happened between the two sides, China eventually agreed to release the overseas funds, and Beijing's recognition of NTC was cemented, although rather belatedly in the NTC's eyes.

III. CHINA'S INTERACTION WITH THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY OVER THE LIBYAN QUESTION.

A key aspect of China's changing approach was inter-linked with its contacts and experiences with the international community during the build up to the conflict and as the civil war accelerated.

III.1. China's interaction with the West.

China abstained from voting on UN Resolution 1973, although it favoured the no-fly zone as a peace-keeping action to stop the escalation of the crisis under UN involvement (while opposing the NATO-led bombing of Libya as derogating from the spirit of Resolution 1973).

A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson expressed regret over the multi-national armed attack on Libya in a press conference: "China never favours the use of force in international relations, advocates adherence to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter and related international laws, and respect for the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Libya" (Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2011).

There were several reasons why Beijing consistently opposed the US-supported, NATO-led air attack on Gaddafi's troops. Firstly, it had not been supported or authorized by the UN. In Beijing's eyes, only the UN has the legitimate right to lead an intervention or authorise others to intervene in Libya's civil war with the aim of peacekeeping by force. From this perspective the NATO-led air attack was contrary to the spirit of the UN Charter, and also violated the non-interference principle that Beijing cherishes and the UN recognises.

Secondly, the bombing overreached the African Union's and Arab League's original objectives. Neither organisation wanted an escalation or complication of the crisis due to armed intervention. Meanwhile, China hoped its anti-interventionist stance would conserve consistency and reinforce cooperation with the AU and the Arab League.

After the bombing began, AU Commission Chairman Jean Ping declared in Tunisia that the AU advocated a peaceful resolution of the Libya crisis, and opposed the use of force until all chances of peaceful resolution had been exhausted (People's Daily, 2011a). In a special AU conference held on the Libya issue this organisation clearly stated its opposition to any kind of foreign armed intervention in Libya. On 27 April the AU issued a formal statement: "The African Union urges all related parties to refrain from launching attacks, including attacking

the Libyan senior officials and socio-economic infrastructure as air strike targets of military action”. Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa also censured the Western military strikes against Libya as overreaching the act of setting up the no-fly zone in Libya that the Arab countries had originally supported; that is, the Arab League did not support these air strikes, although some members like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates broke ranks and joined the strike action.

Thirdly, air strikes made the situation in Libya more complicated, which was not good news for Chinese economic interests. The situation in Libya had previously been stabilising, and China’s infrastructure projects in the country might have been resumed earlier. Foreign armed intervention made the future of the country more uncertain.

Fourthly, Beijing was obliged to make up for its mistake in abstaining from Resolution 1973 by censuring NATO’s action in Libya, because the abstention actually encouraged the Western armed intervention, which China had had the right to veto as a permanent member of the UNSC. So China’s opposition to the air strikes was also a remedial measure.

Against this background, China began to voice its opposition on every possible occasion. When French President Sarkozy visited Beijing after the strikes began, Chinese President Hu Jintao informed him that China was unhappy with the NATO-led bombing of Libya. If the air strikes led to civilian deaths, it would violate the original intent of the UN resolution, Hu added. Foreign Affairs Minister Yang Jiechi appealed for an immediate ceasefire in Libya when he met with Guido Westerwelle, his German counterpart, in Beijing. Germany was one Western country that was not involved in the air attack on Libya.

Ironically, despite China’s disagreement with the air strike plan, it took no substantial measures to stop it. China could at least have initiated debates in UN, bringing some international pressure to bear on the West, or cooperated with other international actors to try and stop the strikes through coordination between the AU, the Arab League and the West. However, China did nothing except for some rhetoric.

As the civil war came to an end, China’s representatives, invited by France, attended the Friends of Libya international conference in Paris. There Vice-Foreign Minister Zhai Jun advocated four action points concerning Libya’s political transition and reconstruction in the post-Gaddafi era: 1) restore stability in Libya as soon as possible; 2) open up the political

transition inclusively so as fully to cater for the interests of different factions, tribes and geographical areas, and maintain Libya's national unity; 3) respect the choice of the Libyan people and the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Libya, letting the people decide their own future and destiny; 4) strengthen coordination and cooperation with the AU, Arab League, and the Islamic Conference Organization under UN leadership to help Libyans restore stability and rebuild their homes.

In sum, China took no active steps to stop either the NATO-led air strike or the West-supported rebel attack on Tripoli, nor did it coordinate with the West to stabilise Libya's situation, except for some diplomatic persuasion and opposition.

III.2. China's interaction with international organisations.

China abstained from voting on UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which set up a no-fly zone in Libya, so as to retard the escalation of the crisis. According to Beijing's explanations, abstention indicated that China agreed to the implementation of UN-led peacekeeping in Libya, but hoped to coordinate its position with the AU and the Arab League, which had important authority to deal with the crisis.

From the first stages of the crisis, then, China maintained its position with the UN, the AU and the Arab League. Since UNSC Resolution 1973 did not violate the non-interference principle and, most importantly, was advocated by the UN and agreed by the AU and Arab League, Beijing had no reason to veto it.

Once the civil war was in full tilt, and the AU and the Arab League were attempting to act as mediators between Tripoli and Benghazi, Beijing expressed respect for the AU and Arab League: its spokesperson said all involved conflicting parties should seriously heed the AU's suggestions and plans, its roadmap to peace in particular.

As the war drew to a close, the AU at its conference on the Libyan question, held in South Africa on 14 September, called for Libya to set up an inclusive government as soon as possible, outlining concrete approaches to realising it. On the next day, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Jiang Yu said China appreciated the active role that AU had played in the Libyan issue (People's Daily, 2011b). Simultaneously, China appealed to all groups in Libya to actively concern themselves with the mediation programmes offered by the AU.

For Beijing, the United Nations was the best and most legitimate platform for putting into practice Libya's reconstruction in the post-civil war era (Ge Chong, 2011). On one occasion Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi said the UN should play the main role in post-war Libya. He also said the UN should coordinate and cooperate with the AU and Arab League in resolving Libya's issues: "Not only Western powers, but also international organisations should participate in the reconstruction of Libya in the post-war era", he said when telephoning Ban Ki-Moon, Secretary General of the UN (Xinhua News, 2011).

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS: SOFT ENGAGEMENT IS NEEDED FOR BEIJING.

Ever since the founding of the People's Republic of China, non-interference has been a basic principle of Chinese foreign policy; however, as Chinese economic and geopolitical interests have proliferated in the 21st century, this principle has come to be pointedly questioned by some Chinese scholars and media. But, in practice, the principle has not been abandoned, but rather implemented with a more sophisticated approach than before. Some general concluding remarks can be made.

IV.1. China has essentially stood by its non-interference principle in the Libyan Crisis, and will do so in future.

In general, and taking into account the whole story of Beijing's engagement in the Libya Crisis, it may be concluded that China has not derogated from the non-interference principle, although it sometimes adopted a hedging policy.

At the beginning of the war, China by abstaining kept silent on, if it did not indeed support UNSC Resolution 1973. This meant that China respected the UN decision for a no-fly zone, as this was not an armed intervention but a peacekeeping measure. When the NATO-led strikes surprised it, China expressed opposition, which was the same as insisting on the non-interference principle.

In the mid-stage of the civil war, China felt obliged to abandon strict neutrality in favour of a hedging policy: it became deeply engaged in the domestic affairs of Libya by contacting the rebels, even though they were not recognised as legitimate by Beijing at the time. This meant it wanted to influence the progress of the civil war, though the influence was weak and indirect. In any case, a hedging policy is not the same thing as intervention: it was done by

peaceful means, without bias toward any side in the conflict, much like a mediator.

After the war ended, China believed the main actor in Libya's reconstruction should be the UN, which meant China wanted the post-war resolution of Libya's crisis to be based on international legitimacy after things had gone off this "right" track. Of course, this also implies that Beijing hoped the reconstruction of Libya, if carried out not only by the Western powers but also by the UN, would benefit China upon its return to the country.

Generally speaking, China's engagement in the Libyan crisis was based on the non-interference principle except for a hesitant hedging policy. To some extent Beijing punished itself by sticking to its principles, because the rebels' criticism put much pressure on it during the war as well as post-war, owing to the Western military victory. Be all that as it may, China has generally insisted on the independence and sovereignty of Libya.

IV.2. The difficulty of adhering to China's traditional non-interference policy in all cases, considering the global expansion of its interests and responsibilities.

As in the Libyan case, so also, practically, in other recent cases like the Darfur Crisis or the Syrian civil war, China finds it much harder to adhere punctiliously to the non-interference principle, in countries and regions of unrest especially, now that its economic and geopolitical interests have expanded in the world more than before.

Beijing has tried to keep its promises to respect the non-interference principle, but the occasional contacts with the Benghazi-based rebels reflected Beijing's awkward choice between adherence to and violation of this principle in certain atypical cases. The hedging policy is Beijing's balancing of its conflicting self-interests, to be used in countries torn by warring factions. In order to keep its original contracts with the Tripoli regime in effect during and after the war, and also to share a slice of the post-war reconstruction cake, Beijing had to hedge its bets by corresponding with the rebels. Although its engagement in Libya's civil war was low-key and had no direct effect on the progress of the conflict, contact with the NTC nonetheless violated the usual Chinese practice of non-interference, especially given that the Gaddafi regime still held a seat in the UN and had an embassy in Beijing. It will be difficult for Beijing to reconcile the protection of its overseas economic and geopolitical interests with strict adherence to non-interference.

IV.3. Soft involvement in foreign states' internal affairs is increasingly unavoidable.

One possible resolution to the difficulty of balancing protection of national interests overseas with adherence to non-interference is for China to take a flexible and smart approach to engagement in the internal affairs of interdependent countries and regions. To deal with its dilemma in conflicted regions, soft engagement through constructive and peaceful approaches without armed intervention is a likelier choice for Beijing. China is increasingly inclined to play the mediator and coordinator role during an international crisis, not merely afterwards.

This paper concludes that crisis management ought to be based on three principles: 1) a pacific approach; 2) the bi- or multi-laterality of contacts; and 3) the goal of stabilising conflicted countries and regions. Following these precepts, soft engagement by China should differ from Western-style intervention in several important dimensions: 1) Soft engagement is based on peaceful, defensive, and diplomatic means; while intervention is offensive, even an armed threat toward or invasion of a sovereign state. 2) Soft engagement is always a hedging or balancing policy, rather than a one-sided policy, as the West used in Libya – meaning that soft engagement should practise to avoid directly affecting the course of internal affairs, or to affect them minimally; whereas intervention is an action intended to drastically affect other countries' internal affairs, viz. regime change. 3) Soft engagement should be pursued, if at all possible, under the umbrella of the UN or some other multi-lateral organisation; in contrast to intervention, which is unilateral or, if pursued under colour of the UN, then without its bona fide authority. 4) Soft engagement must stabilise the country or region that has fallen into crisis, or at least endeavour to conserve the status quo and prevent the situation from deteriorating further; whereas, intervention is aimed at transforming the status quo.

In the sense of the foregoing comparison, soft engagement in lieu of intervention is one possible approach Beijing could take to protect its overseas interests in future, while at the same time avoiding significant or conspicuous violations of the non-interference principle.

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