China as Peacekeeper: An Updated Perspective on Humanitarian Intervention
By Bernard Yudkin Geoxavier

Steven Hill and Robert Weiss contributed an op-ed in the Spring/Summer 2011 edition of the Yale Journal of International Affairs on China’s increased participation in peacekeeping operations. They asked whether China’s abstention on UN Security Council Resolution 1973 and subsequent actions marked a “new tolerance for (or even, an embrace of) more aggressive forms of intervention.” Furthermore, Hill and Weiss put forth the concern that a return to “mutual suspicion” between the United States and China could threaten cooperation and support for future peacekeeping missions.

Since then, China’s position toward UN Security Council action and future humanitarian interventions has become clearer. Rather than consistently supporting intervention, China will likely take a conservative and self-interested approach, and will thus address international and regional crises through a pragmatic case-by-case strategy. Yet within this case-by-case strategy, while China’s actions may vary, its rationale does not. The decision to embrace intervention will have more to do with protecting its national interests and economic investments and less to do with a genuine belief in the responsibility to protect against gross violations of human rights. The unfolding Syrian crisis is significant in understanding where China stands on the issue of humanitarian intervention.

China’s February 2012 veto of a UN Security Council draft resolution to condemn the Syrian government, which blocked attempts by the United States and its European partners to back an Arab League effort to get Assad to yield power, has highlighted the extent of Chinese displeasure at how the NATO-led Libyan campaign played out. Looking back upon the use of force, the People’s Daily, China’s largest English-language state-run newspaper, noted that “Libya was a negative case study . . . {here} the situation in Syria is extremely complex. Simplistically supporting one side and suppressing the other might seem a helpful way of turning things around, but in fact it would be sowing fresh seeds of disaster.” At the same time, Chinese academia has

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largely reflected the government’s underlying suspicion as to the ulterior motives of countries that have undertaken such action, and has pointed to the devastating effects once international media move on and Western powers achieve “success.”

Enlightened Self-Interest

For its part, China strives to avoid putting the country in an isolated or unpopular position. Chinese leaders have tended to follow Deng Xiaoping’s motto of keeping a low profile and not taking the lead in world affairs. This adherence to the principle of “non-intervention” stems from a belief that an over-engaged foreign policy would complicate China’s trade relations and economic interests in other countries, as well as raise fears of foreign intervention in its own domestic affairs, particularly in restive areas like Tibet and Xinjiang. Recently, however, expanding global interests have led to increased awareness in Beijing that instability abroad could spell instability at home, and that crises in the developing world might directly threaten China’s resource import and export markets. As such, China’s desire to play the role of a regional and global “responsible power” manifests itself in a desire to lead the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and negotiate a series of free trade agreements in North and Southeast Asia. Yet there is a limit to how far China is willing to bend on the issue of sovereignty and intervention. When China’s political or economic interests are at risk, it will more likely support action. When they are not, China’s approach will vary.

For example, Hill and Weiss note China’s rejection of interventionist measures at the UN in regards to neighbors Myanmar and North Korea. Historically, China has often supported North Korea and shielded it from condemnation and sanctions by the Security Council, and has also promoted deep economic and political relations with Myanmar. Establishing a secure periphery of allies has always been China’s immediate strategic goal; blocking strong, coordinated, international action in nations around China helps ensure that it can dictate the terms in its own neighborhood and, in the case of Myanmar, receive economic benefits in exchange. This bipolar approach to intervention comes about when China has, on one hand, tread very cautiously in embracing interventionist measures, while on the other it has touted its participation and contribution to the same peacekeeping deployments as evidence that it is a responsible world power. In fact, if peacekeeping operations supported by China are mapped over its economic interests, a direct correlation is clear: Sudan, with strategic resources such as oil; Congo and the Ivory Coast, with extensive contracts for rare minerals by state-owned enterprises; and Somalia, with sea lanes and cargo in need of protection from piracy — China has supported intervention in countries only where its investments were in danger.

Syria: Implications for Further (In)Action

Displeased that the Western-led humanitarian intervention in Libya resulted in regime change, policy-making circles in Beijing were easily won over by the interventionist
slippery slope argument, which warns against the danger of overstepping the set of actions permitted by authorized humanitarian intervention. China worries that humanitarian intervention could turn into a springboard to usurp a national government’s authority, and is concerned that it could be used against governments it likes. Yet by joining Russia in blocking attempts by other Security Council members to condemn Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and demand an end to violence, China took a stance on a controversial issue, and a risk it did not need to take, to protect a country of negligible geopolitical value to Chinese interests. China’s lack of investments in Syria would by itself rule out support for intervention, but with Russia already standing in the way, China’s veto was superfluous. The global reaction against China’s veto prompted explanatory editorials in leading Chinese periodicals, the dispatching of envoys to the Middle East, and support for Security Council demands that Syria grant humanitarian access to the Red Crescent. What this implies is that while China’s vote against intervention in Syrian was intended to convey its displeasure over how the intervention in Libya unfolded, it did not anticipate the fallout. This miscalculation did nothing but heap mounds of bad press on China, which is increasingly concerned about its image abroad.

At home, Chinese scholars asserted their broader view that China “should take international responsibilities actively and selectively,” and that it should strategically give first priority to domestic problems and tactically protect national interests in addressing international obligations. Yet China’s evolving approach to peacekeeping and humanitarian intervention is yoked to a realist understanding of the geopolitical needs of the moment. This is what American policy makers must be most cognizant of moving forward.

At the same time, there is a desire in China to move past its century of “national humiliation” and “keep an ordinary mentality as a great power should do instead of swinging between low self-esteem and confidence.” To do so would require an even and consistent application of humanitarian intervention as well as a consistent evaluation of China’s motives. Peacekeeping operations or actions in Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and the Congo have directly benefited China’s economic and geo-political priorities. In backing such future operations, Beijing should demonstrate that intervention can and may be a useful tool not left to Western powers exclusively and not only used to protect national interests.

As humanitarian intervention and peacekeeping operations threaten to erode its sacred tenet of non-intervention, Chinese policy makers will find it increasingly difficult to balance the need to safeguard its interests with the desire to assure the international community of its commitment to peace and security. An honest assessment of Chinese priorities and interests on a case-by-case basis can open the possibility for increased cooperation with China in the near future.

– Kacie Miura served as Lead Editor for this op-ed.
NOTES


2 The People’s Daily, “How can we truly act responsibly towards the Syrian People”, February 6th, 2012, (Chinese title: 怎样做才是真正对叙利亚人民负责)


5 International Crisis Group, “China’s Thirst for Oil”, June 2008; Ian Taylor, “China’s Oil Diplomacy in Africa”, International Affairs, (September 2006 Volume 82, Number 5)


7 Jin, Big Power’s Responsibility: China’s Perspective, 11.