



## **How the Middle East's Uprisings Affect China's Foreign Relations**

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2 May 2011

The recent civic uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and elsewhere in the Middle East have important consequences for China's foreign relations. With the United States needing to pay more attention to the Middle East, it will have less opportunity to focus on China. At the same time, the return of a US policy that is aimed at promoting democracy can have a destabilizing effect on Sino-US relations. China might reassess how it shapes its relations with highly repressive regimes, and it will have to take into account that the Western countries are now better positioned to push resolutions that are aimed at intervening in certain types of countries through the United Nations Security Council.

### **Fundamental Change**

The uprisings do not fit with the paradigm that assumes that the predominant struggle in Middle Eastern politics is between US-backed authoritarian regimes and Islamic fundamentalism. Instead, the recent revolts have involved a 'third force', namely the urban underdogs. Moreover, these popular movements are largely disorganized, have no leaders, and are not based on clearly defined ideas. The uprisings are the outcome of the poor economic situation of the common people, the severe and high-handed authoritarian suppression of their fundamental liberties, and the highly corrupt nature of their governments. More situational factors also play a role: the spillover effect from revolts in one country to the next; the availability of modern forms of communication to enable mobilization; the use of symbolic places of mass gathering (in the case of Tahrir Square in Cairo); overwhelming attention from the West; and the policy inclinations of the US and European governments.

Important changes are taking place at the international level, in particular with regard to the United States. The Arab world is transforming and becoming more tumultuous. The United States will become more deeply involved in this region, where it will be facing new dilemmas in an increasingly complex situation. The fight against terror will no longer be overwhelmingly dominant, but merely part of a more complex mixture of issues upon which the United States needs to focus. 'Pushing democracy' has returned as a major foreign policy theme in Washington, as the uprisings are partially restoring the West's self-confidence. This confidence had been severely undermined by the global financial crisis, but the United States and other Western countries are feeling more confident once again about the universal applicability of their values and about their own historical fate.

### **China's Foreign Relations**

All of this has major implications for China's foreign relations. The United States' deeper involvement in the Middle East is favourable to China, as the United States will be less able to place focused attention and pressure on China. On the other hand, the partial return of the pushing of democracy is not to the benefit of China or to stable Sino-US relations. China may also need to reconsider its quite amicable relationships with regimes that are repressive, corrupt and have little popular support. China is insufficiently prepared to deal with dramatic political changes in such countries, as has been clearly shown in the past, when China's relations with Iran (1979), Romania (1989) and Serbia (1999) were

severely affected. This happened more recently in Zimbabwe, and now also in Egypt and Sudan. Other countries where similar developments could take place are Burma, North Korea, and perhaps also Pakistan.

The Middle Eastern turmoil is also relevant for China's domestic stability. Some activists in and outside China are hoping for a 'Chinese jasmine revolution'. The Chinese government overreacted somewhat, particularly in the early days, by taking strong domestic security precautions when there were no signs of widespread activism in China. This may have been the activists' immediate purpose: to embarrass the Chinese government and to show its lack of self-confidence to the world and the Chinese public. This in turn could make the Chinese government more hesitant about deepening economic and political reforms.

### **Undermining the Principle of Non-Intervention**

The uprisings are also affecting China's international position with regard to the issue of intervention. The Chinese government probably believed that it had no choice other than to allow the UN Security Council to adopt Resolution 1973, which gave the international community the authority to establish a no-fly zone over Libya, because it was clear that the United States, France and the United Kingdom were resolutely determined to launch a military strike in order to save the armed insurgents in Libya from defeat by government forces, *and* because certain Arab and African countries supported and even intended to join the intervention. Had Beijing vetoed the resolution, China's relations with both the West and the Arab countries involved would have temporarily become severely strained. It was also obvious to China that even if the resolution was vetoed and a Security Council mandate was lacking, the United States and others would still launch their attack.

This was a hard decision for China, mainly because Resolution 1973 and the subsequent Western military action could in principle form a dangerous precedent for future military interventions in developing countries where civil war or domestic disturbances take place. The situation is highly similar to NATO's armed intervention in Kosovo in 1999, although this time China and Russia abstained from voting, resulting in the Security Council mandate regarding Libya. International law has now thus created a potentially dangerous precedent, and even a revision of previous norms in favour of armed intervention in a civil war or in an instance of domestic disturbance. In the future, the United States and its associates might make use of this, damaging the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other states.

China's hope for stable Sino-US relations following the state visit of Chinese President Hu Jintao to the United States in January 2011, and China's important relationship with Saudi Arabia, had induced Beijing to abstain from using its veto in the UN Security Council. China now regrets its decision, because of the intensity of the Western military strikes and the fact that the West has gone beyond Resolution 1973's purpose. But when comparing the present situation with the 1999 Kosovo crisis, China's and Russia's response this time appears quite weak. If a similar case occurs in the foreseeable future, it does not seem very likely that these two powers would use their veto in order to protect the principle of non-interference. In other words, should the United States and its associates in the UN Security Council act resolutely in the coming years with the aim of effecting an intervention in countries other than China, Russia, or close allies thereof, then they may well be able to push through the relevant resolution.

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