

# China's perilous Libyan adventure

[Ted Galen Carpenter](#) - [Asian Waves](#) - 9/9/2011

The Libyan revolution (and the so-called Arab Spring generally) has created both opportunities and problems for China's foreign policy. Before the onset of the 2011 turmoil in much of the Middle East and North Africa, Beijing's policy toward countries in that part of the world was one of unapologetic realism. China's rapidly growing economy requires abundant energy supplies (primarily oil), and a substantial portion of those supplies were under the jurisdiction of entrenched autocratic governments. Beijing was entirely willing to overlook both the rampant corruption and the widespread human rights abuse that characterized many of those regimes.

Chinese leaders were consistently agnostic about the political orientation of its Middle East trade and investment partners. Thus, China had extensive economic and political ties with both the conservative, pro-US Saudi royal family and the radical, rabidly anti-US regime in Iran. Beijing showed little hesitation to do business even with governments that were considered pariahs within the wider international community. China preserved important trade relations with Sudan and resisted Western pressure to sever ties with the government of President Omar Hassan al-Bashir, even as charges of genocide in the secessionist Darfur region mounted. China repeatedly engaged in foot dragging on international sanctions against Iran's clerical regime over Tehran's nuclear program. And Beijing maintained cordial relations with Libya's Muammar Gheddafi even as the rebellion against his four-decade-long repressive rule began.

Once the fighting in Libya intensified, though, Chinese policy makers began to hedge their bets. They were also worried about the danger to their citizens living and working in Libya - mostly engineers, managers and consultants in the oil industry. Angry supporters of the rebellion were well aware of the close relationship between Gheddafi's government and Beijing, and Chinese in Libya were highly visible targets for retaliation. Among other steps, China deployed a naval vessel to waters off Libya, ostensibly for the possible evacuation of its citizens.

Such a move so far from the Chinese mainland was unprecedented, and Western observers were at least slightly suspicious about Beijing's official justification. Although an evacuation mission was certainly a possibility, some pundits and experts in the West saw the deployment also as a way of displaying China's growing military capability and expanding geographic interests.

The NATO intervention against Gheddafi's regime put Chinese policy makers in an uncomfortable position. Beijing was reluctant to endorse yet another Western military mission against a government that was on good terms with China. On the other hand, the missile strikes and air cover that NATO provided made it increasingly likely that the rebel forces would eventually oust Gheddafi. That created an incentive for Beijing to avoid measures that might antagonize the insurgents.

Chinese officials sought to carry out a delicate balancing act - trying to maintain relations with the beleaguered government in Tripoli in case it survived and managed to retain control over at least part of Libya's territory, while at the same time putting out feelers to the rebel National Transitional Council in case it achieved a complete victory. The extent of the effort to stay on that diplomatic tightrope was apparent when Chinese officials simultaneously initiated talks with insurgent representatives and hosted the Libyan foreign minister in Beijing.

As the balance of fighting tilted against Gheddafi's forces, Beijing's policy began to shift more toward the insurgents. A key change came in late August when the Chinese foreign ministry announced that China was prepared to participate actively in a post-reconstruction mission in Libya. Not only was Beijing prepared to help fund that effort, but there were subtle indications that China might even be willing to provide a limited number of peacekeeping troops.

Those moves were not motivated by humanitarian sentiments. The Chinese government was frantically trying to preserve its economic interests in Libya and prevent the NATO military intervention from paving the way for Western domination of a post-war Libyan economy, especially the country's crucial energy sector.

For a time, it appeared that Beijing might successfully make the adjustment and abandon Gheddafi in a sufficiently timely fashion in order to enjoy a productive relationship with a successor government. Then, a damaging revelation threatened to torpedo that goal. Documents that a Libyan defense ministry official in Tripoli apparently discarded as that city fell to rebel forces created a major embarrassment for Beijing.

Those documents revealed that a Libyan delegation visited Chinese armaments firms in a bid to purchase \$200 million in new weapons to repel insurgent fighters. To avoid the UN ban on supplying arms to Gheddafi's government, the Libyans suggested that the sale officially go to the government of Algeria, which would then transfer identical weapons across the border to Libyan troops.

The reaction from the National Transitional Council was swift and furious. Even though there was no evidence that weapons had actually been shipped (possibly because Gheddafi's loyalist forces collapsed so quickly in August), the new Libyan government stated that it had no intention of approving reconstruction contracts for Chinese firms until the weapons-sale scandal was resolved.

Although the NTC softened that position slightly in early September, affirming that it recognized the importance of friendly ties with China, it was apparent that Beijing's position had been damaged. It is likely that China will pay a diplomatic and economic price for its long-standing support of Gheddafi's rule. Indeed, the Arab Spring as a whole may weaken Beijing's position in that part of the world. Just as restless populations are suspicious and resentful of Washington's cozy ties with autocratic rulers who brutalized and looted their countries, China will win few plaudits from those populations for a similar, cynical approach. Sometimes what looks like realism can turn out to be a myopic policy that produces unpleasant foreign policy results in the long term. That may be a lesson that both Washington and Beijing are about to learn.