This paper examines the Chinese reactions to the Arab Spring and in particular the Libyan crisis. China was the only large power to face questions about stability both in the region as well as at home.

Like the US and Europe, China was caught by surprise by the Arab spring and had to abruptly adapt its foreign policy to events. It found itself obliged to protect its growing commercial and consular interests in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. In Libya alone, official estimates said that China had some 38,000 nationals and contracts worth a total of $18.8 billion\(^1\). Presenting itself as a "new great power", China was able to rescue all of these citizens in relatively short order, leaving nations like India to scramble to evacuate a far smaller number.

China has now reverted to its traditional cautious stance as displayed in the rejection of an international response to the Syria crackdown and in the hostility towards the military intervention in Libya. But overall, it has been a zigzagging path for China. It came forward on the first Libya UN resolution where Gaddafi, a sovereign country’s leader, was sanctioned for violations against his own people and where China had citizens to protect. It then rapidly pulled back into its more traditional posture with the next resolution seeking a no-fly zone – though electing to abstain, a choice that is tantamount to tacit agreement. Yet that under-current of engagement is not to be overlooked and is likely to be a factor in shaping China’s foreign policy in the future.

So the pull from these new burdens of a great power will lead China to expand its capacity in risk-management for future crisis and look beyond purely government-to-government relations to hedge for abrupt changes. As one Chinese thinker put it, «1979, we lost on the putting all our eggs in one basket with the Shah in Iran, in 1989, the same with Ceaceascu in Romania. Now we should be wiser». China has so much more to lose abroad now, with its substantial foreign investments, especially in less stable parts of Africa. This

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will lead China to overcome narrow views of stability and non-interference with good governance increasingly becoming a part of the Chinese foreign policy vocabulary. As a Chinese high-ranking official told me, the nation had to do its part to convince countries «that it is in their longer term interest to solve their internal problems»2. While it remains yet to be seen in what way will this be translated into Chinese actions abroad, it could provide Europe with a new opportunity for engagement.

Paradoxically, larger efforts to protect Chinese citizens abroad has not led to better individual rights at home. Minor calls for Jasmine revolutions at home and citizens’ protest in the shape of strolls in public places were met with a harsh regime clampdown. A hardening supported by a 13.8% hike in the internal security budget, bringing it to $95 billion, thus overtaking the official PLA budget of $91.5 billion (which still grew by 12.7%). Security forces cast a wide net and detained and arrested many activists whose activities bore no relation to any calls for Jasmine demonstrations.

Prominent artist Ai Weiwei’s detention at the beginning of April brought the spotlight of international attention on the clamp-down. Both Catherine Ashton3 and the new EU ambassador in Beijing4 have spoken out against the abuses as have the Americans most forcefully at the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue in Washington the 9 and 10 of May with robust language from both Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton and Vice-President Joe Biden.

China’s new round of human rights abuses presents the EU with a troublesome dilemma, particularly in view of the EU’s its renewed focus on respecting the right of the people. As French President Nicolas Sarkozy put it at the EU Summit the 24th of March, «every ruler….must understand that the reaction of the international community and Europe will from now on be the same each time», a line which while pointing at “Arab rulers”, raised questions for the EU’s relationship with other powers like China.

**Chinese reactions to the unfolding Arab Spring**

From the outset, China eyed the revolutions in the Middle East cautiously. Tunisia resembled a “miniature China”, with an authoritarian regime and relatively high growth. Chinese officials tried to let the issue slip under the radar, in part out of a lack of understanding what was going on, but also in order to prevent sparking internal debates about the value of the “Beijing Consensus” abroad and – even worse – at home.

On Egypt, official Chinese press coverage was directed mainly at efforts to get Chinese nationals out of the country. Their actual number – around 1,800 – was far smaller than in Libya, but Chinese rescue efforts included the evacuation of around 300 Taiwanese, giving Beijing the perfect opportunity for a positive press spin in China. This also served to divert Chinese press coverage away from sensitive issues about democracy and social change, though some of the more liberal parts of the Chinese press like Caixin at least alluded to the instability of autocracy and the notion that democratic deliberations lead to peace5.

Beijing’s ambition was to continue promoting a similar position on Libya, but Gadhafi’s violent struggle to hold onto power made that impossible. By throwing the country into chaos, the Libyan leader made the orderly evacuation of Chinese nationals more difficult with China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) in particular complaining that its operations in the country were attacked6. In allowing this to take place, Gadhafi infringed on China’s holy principle: stability. A frigate that was participating in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden was redeployed to assist in rescue efforts. Four Chinese military transport planes were also sent from Xinjiang, their take-off marking a new departure for Chinese foreign policy.

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2 Author interview Beijing, March 23, 2011.
Currently, China is perceived from where it ended, not where it started on Libya. Having completed President Hu’s command to “spare no efforts to ensure the safety of life and properties of Chinese citizens in Libya,” China gave its support to UN Security Council resolution 1970 that imposed an arms embargo, a travel ban and an asset freeze on Gadhafi and his “nearest and dearest”7. However, three short weeks later, the Chinese diplomatic turtle withdrew into its hard shell of traditional principles at UN Security Council resolution 1973 that authorized a no-fly zone and the international community «to take all necessary measures….to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, including Benghazi»8.

Vice Foreign Minister Fu Ying tried to make the abstention resemble a no-vote, declaring, «We don’t support military action against Libya, as we think this will cause even more civilian casualties»9. Likewise, President Hu Jintao used the occasion of the French-sponsored G-20 Nanjing meeting on March 31, to admonish Sarkozy on the pernicious effect of military action: «History repeatedly proves that armed force doesn’t solve problems, giving peace a chance suits the common interests of all sides», Sarkozy said10. One week later, German foreign Minister, Guido Westerwelle11, was received as an “ally” following the two countries’ decision to abstain on the Security Council Resolution, once again demonstrating how Europe’s large states’ failure to coordinate foreign policy also has implications for how serious Europe as an coordinated actor is taken in China and further abroad.

Yet an abstention is in essence a tactic agreement and behind the diplomatic veil, China was more forthcoming. During the UN negotiations, inside observers informed us that China never threatened to veto the last Libya resolution; normally a traditional tactic used at least for negotiating purposes of watering-down the resolution. But there was more to this Chinese activity at the UN than simple scoring diplomatic points. This is in stark contrast to 2007, when China vetoed a UN resolution criticizing Myanmar. Then, Chinese UN ambassador Wang Guangya swept the issue under the rug, stating nonchalantly, «No country is perfect»12. China also routinely blocks international action over other intransigent governments like Zimbabwe and North Korea. And traditionally, China would accept that instability and coups are part of the game of doing business in Africa without the need for interference13. In Libya, China went far down the road of promoting the doctrine of the “responsibility to protect” yet stopping abruptly when reaching military intervention – a doctrine Beijing has traditionally feared might be used against it regarding its own dispute-ridden provinces.

But why Libya, and what explains China’s decision to change tack now? Domestically, had Beijing blocked action at the UN while having difficulty getting its nationals out of a chaotic situation, it would have had a tough time selling its policies as a success to domestic audiences. China was also influenced by traditional South-South cooperation which made it pay attention to the views of the other Arab nations and regional organizations such as the Arab League that were favouring UN action.

China’s capacity in rescuing so many citizens so rapidly was impressive, but it reminded Beijing planners of the volume of citizens around the globe in potentially similar situations. There are quite a number of countries that in Chinese terminology are too big – in terms of Chinese nationals – to fail. For example, the United Arab Emirates with roughly 200,000 and South Africa with 350,000 (to be sure, these two

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9 V. POP, China voices worry about NATO civilian casualties in Libya, in «EU Observer», March 26, 2011.
13 See J. HOLSLAG, China and the Coups: coping with instability in Africa, in «African Affairs», 00/00, pp. 1-20.
countries are not particularly likely to devolve into substantial instability\textsuperscript{14}). Given the growing Chinese footprint globally with ex-pats numbers growing with around 2 million in the last five years\textsuperscript{15} and in particular in troubled parts of Africa with more than a million\textsuperscript{16}, this is a large and growing number that up to this point the Chinese foreign ministry had few specifics about. The “going out” strategy orchestrated by the Ministry of Commerce and spearheaded by eager Chinese provinces now has to be squared with broader strategic calculations. And with the evacuation of Chinese citizens out of Libya, the Chinese government has set a precedent that it will do what it takes to bring its citizens out of chaotic situations.

Thus, the need to protect its economic interests and nationals abroad, combined with the tension with Colonel Gadhafi’s regime have given China’s foreign policy a new twist. Trends like these will bring China further out into the world and test its principles, just as broadening interests changed the behaviour of the UK and the US in preceding centuries. In that vein, a red thread runs from Sudan, where China in 2011 provided election observers for the Southern referendum and the UN resolutions on Libya and on Ivory Coast allowing international reactions to internal situations.

The internal reaction to Jasmine spring

The smell of Jasmine also spread inside China, with anonymous online organizers calling for citizens to participate in protests in designated places in major cities. In order to avoid the hard fist of the law, organizers told individuals to simply stroll by the protest area so as to confuse security officials. Not many showed up and for the most part the heavy presence of Chinese police was only matched by the foreign media. Local demonstrators seemed largely to be absent. Instead it became an aggressive encounter between police and foreign press. This led to condemnatory stories in the international press. The government’s reaction to the protest became a bigger story than the actual protests.

Since then there has been a widespread crackdown on activists, lawyers and social rights advocates combining regular arrests with extra-judicial disappearances a return to earlier forms of repression. And an official seal is seemingly placed on the larger crackdown, personified by the Foreign Ministry spokesman dismissing journalist’s complaints with comments about not using «the law as a shield»\textsuperscript{17}. All of which puts into question the party’s commitment to genuinely allowing checks and balances inside the legal system, and the early fruits of reform with active defence lawyers taking up cases of public interest for citizens demanding justice from the state.

Some explanations to the regime’s heavy-handed reaction to these minor calls for Jasmine-revolution can be discerned. Fear was stoked by seeing how the self-immolation of a 26-year-old in Tunisia could set a whole region alight. As Politburo member and security head Zhou Yongkang imparted to his forces in the wake of the trouble in Egypt, any trouble must be nipped firmly in the bud before it could get out of hand, «strive to defuse conflicts and disputes while they are still embryonic»\textsuperscript{18}. Combine that with the close to hundred thousand protests in China per year and you need to clamp down broadly to make sure you stamp out the right one. Additionally, the Jasmine-events coincided with the major Party conferences in March in Beijing, where security is always tightened.

Yet at the same time, the Chinese people seem to be quite satisfied with their rulers. The Pew research Center’s polls from 2010 showed that 87% of Chinese compared to 28% in Egypt were satisfied with the state of affairs in their country. 91% saw the country’s economic situation as good compared to 20% of Egyptians. Yet this is based on the expectation that the Chinese economy will continue to grow strongly.

\textsuperscript{15} http://www.brookings.edu/testimony/2011/0413_china_companies_downs.aspx#_ftnref1.
\textsuperscript{16} http://www.spacewar.com/reports/Commentary_Pakistans_split_personality_999.htm.
\textsuperscript{17} A Spear not a Shield, in «The Economist, April 4, 2011.
\textsuperscript{18} C. BUCKLEY, China calls for domestic unrest to be defused, in «Reuters», February 21, 2011.
Still other polls paint a bleaker picture with the Chinese struggling particularly against rising prices\(^\text{19}\). Continuing economic progress will be an Achilles’ heel for the Chinese government, which is why so much effort is put into combating inflation and cooling down an overheating housing market. Aside from the fact that finding good jobs in China is becoming increasingly difficult, there is a noticeable elevation in food prices, putting a pinch on people’s most basic needs. And mixed in with this are periodic poisoned food scares with affluent mainlanders getting milk sent from Hong Kong, not trusting government guarantees after the 2008 Sanlu milk scandal.

Another explanation is that the Jasmine clampdown was just a handy excuse for striking down before the 2012 succession and an employment of the modern, “bury bad news” communication tactic while the world is focusing on Libya (and Japan’s troubles). The security apparatus could spread the net wider in tranquillity. But while this may have worked for a while, the decision to go after the internationally renowned artist Ai Weiwei’s and his consequent prosecution for economic crimes tipped the balance and brought wide-spread international condemnation, from Europe in particular.

Yet there is a growing desire amongst Chinese citizens to speak their mind. Ordinary Chinese demand justice and fairness, which the government is aware of developing more sophisticated tools for “social management”. Bloggers take up cases from all over the country such as the case nicknamed “my father is Li Gang”, the phrase uttered by Li Qiming after he drunkenly ran down a pair of University students (one died, one broke her leg) and tried to drive away boasting to the crowd of his immunity from prosecution since his father was a local official named Li Gang. In a different case, the old trees from the Republican period crowning Nanjing’s alleys were saved after a combination of local and national protests spurred on by social media\(^\text{20}\).

All of this leads to a larger question of political reforms in China. Wen Jiabao promised to continue political reform at the National People’s Congress last year at the same time as the security forces were contradicting his words rounding up activists. For a long time, there has been a convenient reason to postpone political reform. 2008 was Tibet riots and Olympics; 2009 was Xinjiang riots and the sensitive 20\(^{\text{th}}\) Anniversary of the Tiananmen; in early 2010 it was the Shanghai Expo and later the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to a Chinese imprisoned dissident. Now Jasmine in 2011 brings reforms and activism to a halt in many areas, while television channels are told to restrict their screening of shows that include spy stories, criminals or time-travel in the run-up to the 90\(^{\text{th}}\) anniversary of the founding of China Communist Party (CCP). Given the upcoming 2012 leadership transition, things are not looking like they will be more favourable for the near future either. The direct reasons for the clampdown may be linked to the reactions to the protests in the Arab World; their preponderance long after any actual protests were visibly taking place to highlight the government’s willingness to use quite hard-line methods to stifle domestic dissent.

**Possibilities and challenges for Europe**

China is learning from events in North Africa and the Middle East. Support for unstable regimes is something that can have a directly negative impact on China’s interests abroad and also can lead to costly evacuations of the growing numbers of Chinese citizens now working for Chinese companies on large-scale projects around the world.

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\(^\text{20}\) [http://ecfr.eu/blog/entry/the_tree_revolution_and_citizen_power_in_china](http://ecfr.eu/blog/entry/the_tree_revolution_and_citizen_power_in_china).
China still seeks the advantages of having stable and secure governments to trade with. Yet the Arab street has shown that the people want more than authoritarian stability. China will adapt to this in a pragmatic way in order to protect its interests abroad. It might lead it to be more open to elements of good governance for securing investments and Chinese workers.

For the EU this presents a complex picture – on the one hand, a China that is increasingly appearing to be a possible partner in crisis management yet still on its own terms, but on the other hand also represents a clear challenge to the new dictum of democracy promotion and working with partners advancing similar values. Striking the right balance will likely dictate the shape of the EU-China strategic partnership.

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