

Libyan war accelerates Chinese debate over “non-intervention”

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19 April 2011

The NATO-led war on Libya is fuelling a debate in the Chinese ruling elite over its official foreign policy of “non-intervention” in the internal affairs of other countries. While the policy was always more of a myth than reality, China has used it as a convenient means for doing deals with repressive regimes and criticising, when it suited, the military interventions of the US and its allies.

The increasingly blatant use of military aggression by the US and European powers to further their economic and strategic interests, however, is causing Beijing to rethink. The US and European bombing of Libya has put Chinese investments worth billions of dollars at risk, along with the lives of 35,860 Chinese nationals working in Libya.

To evacuate its citizens, China mounted a major long-distance operation in the Mediterranean Sea involving its navy, military transport planes and civilian ships. Nevertheless, the 75 Chinese firms doing business in Libya were forced to leave behind substantial quantities of valuable equipment. Moreover, China’s ambitions to access significant Libyan energy supplies are now in jeopardy as the US and European powers seek to install a pliant regime more aligned with their requirements.

China, along with Russia, Brazil, India and Germany, abstained on the UN Security Council resolution authorising the imposition of a “no-fly zone” over Libya. Beijing was nonetheless unwilling to exercise its veto power in the UN, as that would have quickly led to a marked deterioration of relations with the US and Europe. At the same time, China was not in a position militarily to further its own interests by joining in the assault on the Libyan regime. Unlike the US, Britain and France, China’s blue water navy is only emerging and lacks any aircraft carrier capacity.

Sections of the Chinese military argue that China must have the military capacity to defend its rapidly growing economic and strategic interests in every corner of the globe. *China Military*, a People’s Liberation Army (PLA) newspaper, commented on April 4 that overseas investment by Chinese companies was increasing at an annual rate of 54 percent. “At

the end of 2010, our foreign investing and cooperating firms numbered nearly 16,000, with 1.4 million personnel, and total overseas assets amounted to almost \$US1.2 trillion... How to effectively protect these increasingly expanding overseas interests is a new subject before us.”

The Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) “non-intervention” policy initially expressed Beijing’s fear of Western aggression, but was always dependent on its own interests. Mao Zedong strongly backed the Soviet military invasion of Hungary in 1956 to crush a workers’ uprising. After the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s, Beijing denounced the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 as “Soviet social imperialism.”

In 1971, the Chinese elite reached a rapprochement with US imperialism, forming a de facto alliance against the Soviet Union. Beijing maintained relations with right-wing, US-backed regimes such as the Chilean military dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet. In 1979, China launched a devastating invasion of Vietnam as part of Washington’s efforts to restabilise the region following its military withdrawal from Vietnam.

Under Deng Xiaoping, China’s foreign policy shifted to a “low-profile” stance. Deng’s far-reaching pro-market reforms, announced in 1978, aimed at transforming China into a giant cheap labour platform within the US-dominated capitalist order, which required an avoidance of tensions with Japan, the US and European powers.

China’s explosive economic growth, however, has since undermined this foreign policy orientation. Last year, China displaced the US as the world’s largest manufacturer, a position that America held for more than a century, and overtook Japan as the world’s second largest economy. Between 2006 and 2010, China’s total non-bond foreign direct investment totalled \$210 billion, mainly in energy, infrastructure and metals, driven by its need for raw materials. In 2009-10, China lent more to the developing countries (\$110 billion) than the World Bank (\$105 billion).

“Non-interference” became a convenient foreign policy tool for Chinese capitalism, as Beijing offered loans, credit and projects to various autocratic regimes in Asia and Africa in return for access to resources or strategic locations. The policy gave Beijing a pretext to refuse to follow the “human rights” campaigns that the US and European powers exploited to further their own interests in these regions.

Libya, however, has become something of a turning point. The NATO bombing campaign has greatly undermined China’s economic position in the country and raised the question in Beijing as to how Chinese interests can be guaranteed. A section of China’s academic establishment is calling for the government to abandon Deng’s “low-profile” policy.

Writing in the *New York Times* on March 31, Professor Yan Xuetong of Tsinghua University declared that he represented those who believed that “the nation needs to be more bold and assertive in international affairs in a way that matches China’s newfound status as a major world power.” He explained that even “a few years ago, almost no Chinese scholar challenged the principle of nonintervention, of infringing on the sovereignty of other nations. Recently there are more and more debates on this issue... Even those Chinese who think we should continue to keep a low profile did not oppose sending military forces to Libya.”

The debate in Chinese ruling circles began long before the Libyan war. The doctrines of American naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan, previously denounced by the CCP as “imperialist,” have been widely discussed. In recent years, Mahan’s “sea power” theory that a trading nation requires a strong navy to protect its shipping routes has become almost official policy. Zhang Wenmu, a prominent “neo-Mahanian,” warned in his 2009 book *China Sea Power* of a scenario very similar to Libya, in which US military or political interference could undermine Chinese economic interests.

An official White Paper on the Chinese military issued in March justified the country’s high military spending and pointed to the need to counter rival powers. In the Asia-Pacific region, it noted: “Suspicion about China, interference and countering moves against China from outside are on the increase.” As a result, the White Paper stated: “Asia-Pacific security is becoming more intricate and volatile. International military competition remains fierce.”

The push for an interventionist foreign policy is also driven by the CCP’s new constituency among the emerging capitalist class and middle classes. As the CCP has largely dropped even nominal references to “socialism,” it has increasingly resorted to reactionary nationalism to cement a political base among

more affluent layers who see their future as bound up with the international rise of Chinese capitalism.

While the Chinese regime has censored any discussion on the struggles of the Tunisian and Egyptian workers, the Internet police have not touched various blogs calling for the deployment of Chinese troops to Libya to protect Chinese investment. Other bloggers have openly called for China to join the Western coalition in order to get “a share of the booty”—Libyan oil.

Hong Kong’s *South China Morning Post* on April 7 pointed to the rise of a “dangerous” militarist current among the middle class in China. One “white collar” activist, Xia Peng, who owns a trading company, told the newspaper: “I tell them [sympathisers] once you have strong military capabilities, you possess powerful political and economic influence in the world... Almost all young Chinese military enthusiasts are patriots, and our government actually has great power to mobilise them during sensitive moments.”

In recent weeks, the Internet police have also turned a blind eye to a campaign by “patriots” against an economist who opposed the building of Chinese aircraft carriers, on the basis that it would ignite an arms race. Various bloggers denounced him as “un-Chinese” and a traitor who should be expelled from the country. While these “activists” represent a thin social layer, the CCP tacitly encourages them as a means of diverting attention from pressing social issues and justifying its burgeoning military spending.

The push for a more interventionist foreign policy by sections of China’s ruling elite is another sign that the ongoing global economic crisis is sharpening rivalry among the major powers for raw materials, markets and spheres of influence. Inevitably, unless the working class abolishes the profit system, these tensions must ultimately lead to direct military conflict.



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