

Western media accuse China of selling arms to Gaddafi

John Chan
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A rash of articles has appeared prominently in the American and European media alleging that China offered the Libyan regime of Muammar Gaddafi “huge stockpiles of arms.” Documents found by the Canadian-base *Globe and Mail* purportedly included a Libyan government memo detailing offers by state-owned Chinese companies to sell \$200 million of arms, missiles and ammunition during a trip to Beijing in mid-July.

The *Globe and Mail* declared: “The documents suggest that Beijing and other governments may have played a double game in the Libyan war, claiming neutrality but covertly helping the dictator.” The article cited National Transitional Council (NTC) military official Omar Hariri as saying the memo would explain the presence of brand-new weapons in the hands of pro-Gaddafi fighters. “I’m almost certain that these guns arrived and were used against our people.”

As the story was picked up by the *New York Times* and the *Financial Times*, its purpose became increasing evident: to justify excluding China from economic relations with the new NATO-backed regime in Tripoli, above all in the oil industry. While China had no major investments in the Libyan oil industry previously, it did have at least \$18 billion worth of infrastructure and telecommunication projects.

The *New York Times* described the arms deal as “an apparent violation of United Nations sanctions.” It cited NTC spokesman Abdulrahman Busin, who suggested that the new government “would seek accountability through appropriate international channels” and that any government found to have violated the sanctions “would have poor prospect for business dealings with

Libya.”

Abdulrahman Busin added: “We have hard evidence of deals going on between China and Gaddafi, and we have all the documents to prove it.” The *New York Times* did note that US State Department, Pentagon and intelligence officials had no knowledge of the dealings and “would need more time to analyse the documents.” Likewise, the UN sanctions committee said nothing had been brought to its attention about China’s alleged breaches.

In response, Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu declared last Monday that Beijing had been unaware of the visit by a Libyan delegation in July to various Chinese arms companies. While admitting that it did take place, Jiang added that China “did not sign any military trade contracts with the Libyan side and certainly did not export any weapons to Libya.”

The *Financial Times*, however, dismissed the statement, declaring: “All Chinese weapons manufacturers are state-owned making it hard for Beijing to argue that no part of the government was aware of the visit.” At this stage, however, it is not clear what talks took place or whether an agreement was actually reached and the arms delivered. *Globe and Mail* reporter Graeme Smith found the papers in the trash in a Tripoli neighbourhood where senior officials lived.

While the US and European powers have yet to take up the story, there is no doubt that the alleged deal will be used cynically to undermine Chinese interests in North Africa. The *Globe and Mail* stated: “Those countries [allegedly supplying arms to Gaddafi’s

forces] may now suffer a disadvantage as Libya's new rulers divide the spoils from their vast energy resources, and select foreign firms for the country's reconstruction."

The *Wall Street Journal* joined the chorus, commenting that it would now be difficult for China's oil companies to tap Libya's oil, especially in the face of European competition. By contrast, it stated, "European governments supported NATO strikes, and several European oil companies already have stakes in the Libya's oil production."

Asked by Al Jazeera if he intended not to award contracts to Chinese companies because of the arms allegations, NTC oil minister Ali Tarhouni replied: "I think the answer is yes, no question about it."

Of course, no action will be taken against the US and its allies, which waged a neo-colonial war to bring down the Gaddafi regime using the pretext of "defending civilians." The NATO powers not only effectively acted as the TNC's air force but provided military assistance, and in the case of France and probably other powers, provided arms to the anti-Gaddafi forces.

The hypocrisy of Washington and its European allies is further highlighted by the recent discovery of documents in the office of Moussa Koussa, who was head of Libya's external security organisation until 2009, detailing its intimate relations of the CIA and MI6. The American and British intelligence agencies had no compunction in using Gaddafi's police-state apparatus to interrogate and torture alleged terrorists who were "rendered" to Libya.

For most of the past decade, the US and European powers maintained ties with the Gaddafi regime and only turned on him as a means of establishing domination over Libyan oil and a bulwark against revolutionary movements in North Africa and the Middle East. The US also seized on the opportunity to teach a lesson to rival China—that despite its waning economic power, American imperialism can still use its military superiority to undermine Chinese influence.

China is currently Africa's largest trading partner. It is increasingly dependent on the continent as a source of energy, raw materials and markets. Chinese companies have potentially lost billions of dollars in contracts as a result of the conflict. When the war broke out, the Chinese military evacuated some 35,000 nationals, mainly workers, from Libya.

China is just as cynical as the Western imperialist powers in the pursuit of its economic and strategic interests. Not wanting to openly challenge Washington at this stage, Beijing did not use its veto power in the UN Security Council to block the UN resolution that was exploited by NATO to justify its "humanitarian" bombing of Libya. It joined the other so-called BRICS countries—Brazil, Russia, India and South Africa—in abstaining.

Until August, Chinese media commentators speculated that the anti-Gaddafi forces were too poorly armed and trained to take Tripoli. The carefully orchestrated seizure of the Libyan capital by opposition militia operating in concert with special forces and intelligence agents from NATO powers will have come as a rude awakening to Beijing. China only belatedly reached out to the NTC as an insurance policy against the fall of Gaddafi.

More fundamentally, however, the Chinese regime will be forced to conclude that it needs to boost its military capacity to be in a position to prosecute its rapidly expanding economic and strategic interests around the globe. As a result, the reckless, predatory war waged by the US and European powers in Libya only heightens the danger of a wider, catastrophic conflict.



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