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How 'status' considerations affect China's UN votes

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Beijing's desire to align with both powerful peers and less influential states leads to a diplomatic balancing act

When China voted for United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1970 to condemn the Libyan government's use of lethal force against protestors, it caught observers off guard. Given Beijing's foreign policy of non-intervention that is reflected in its record of abstention, especially in the case of Darfur (UNSCR 1556, 1564, 1591, 1593 and 1672), this is especially surprising.

What made China cast the unexpected "yes" vote that marked the first time a country was unanimously referred to International Criminal Court?

"Status is an overlooked determinant in trying to explain in how China perceives, and how China explains its voting behaviour and actions at the UN Security Council," asserts **Courtney Fung**, Assistant Professor of International Relations at the University of Hong Kong. She further elaborates:

"By status I mean a State's standing or rank in a status community. It capture the relevance of positionality, vis-a-vis a set of peers, and also China's identity aspects as being a status as a peer."

CHINA'S STATUS (AND TRIGGER)

According to Fung, China sits in the intersection between two peer groups. On one hand is the Great Power Peer Group consisting of countries such as the United States, Great Britain, and France. The other is the Global South Peer Group which consists of Host States ("a State in whose territory a United Nations operation is conducted") and regional organisations which, in the case of Libya, refers to the African Union (AU), The Arab League (formally the League of Arab States LAS), the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

While these organisations normally profess a policy of non-interference, "the LAS cast Libya out and the AU, the OIC and the GCC also condemned Libya's use of force domestically," Fung recounts. "Chinese decision makers in the foreign policy elite were well aware that there was unanimity amongst regional organisations to punish Gaddafi."

This unanimity, together with the P3 of the U.S., Britain and France voting for UNSCR 1970 made it near impossible for China to adopt its usual stance of abstaining. What pushed Beijing over the edge, Fung asserts, was something she describes as a "status trigger".

"Gaddafi made a fundamental mistake...harping back to China's diplomatic ebb," Fung points out referring to Qaddafi's words invoking the Tiananmen crackdown to justify his own actions: "The integrity of China was more important than [the people] in Tiananmen Square".

"He had thought by making a comparison to the Chinese State facing down [protestors at] Tiananmen and held control, he would be able to persuade Chinese elites to support him, as he was willing to use force domestically to try and maintain his leadership control within Libya.

"But the problem was that this backfired. This now precluded the idea of giving a tepid public statement, i.e. 'We don't agree with what's going on in Libyan state, but we don't have opinions about domestic affairs, we stay out of interference etc.' They now realize that they had to take a

yes vote for sanctions in the ICC referral, to send a clear signal that Beijing would be separating itself from Gaddafi.”

She concludes: “They could not go back to this potential turning point where Beijing would be cast out [and going] back to its post-Tiananmen isolation.

(COMMUNIST) PARTY RULES

China’s subsequent abstention vote for UNSCR 1973 that established a no-fly zone – among other restrictions – on Libya reflected LAS’s fraying of internal cohesion. Fung explains: “So Beijing couldn't find an appropriate solution, they couldn't please everyone so it cast an abstention vote, that's at least how I've interpreted this particular language.”

Despite the sometimes unexpected foreign policy stance, Beijing’s actions are ultimately viewed in the prism of the preservation of the Chinese Communist Party. Given UNSCR 1973’s mandate for intervention, how does one view Beijing’s decision against a veto?

“China remains reluctant to condone foreign imposed regime change,” Fung concedes. “The most fundamental reason for this is it sets a president in terms of challenging the parties’ authority as the sole source of government structures within China. Fung articulates:

“If Beijing knows what's coming by abstaining on resolution 1973 on the no-fly zone plus, then Beijing knows that they are more than likely backing a case by permitting a case to go forward that will bring regime change. It is what's keeping them up at night because regime change elsewhere looks like it could be regime change at home with questions pressures of Tibet and Xinjiang.

“And again the Libya case is very, very unique. It was not raised as a threat to international peace and security, it was raised as a threat to human life, a threat to human protection. It's truly heartbreaking and, again, really puzzling why Beijing would then accept, be willing to stomach an abstention vote versus really what was anticipated to be a veto, frankly.

“So that's why I think again it's that case where I think these core interests were somewhat moderated, that they found ways to sort of take status at some threat of its core interest concern.”

Courtney Fung was the speaker at the SMU School of Social Science seminar "China and Intervention at the UN Security Council: Reconciling Status" on July 8, 2019.

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