No. 20
April 2011

SECURITY POLICY BRIEF

Libya and the Post-American World: Implications for the EU

Thomas Renard

This *Security Policy Brief* looks at the vote on the UNSC resolution on Libya and tries to see in it some signs of the new international order in the making. Why did the BRIC countries abstain? Why was the US so shy? What does it all mean for the EU?

Libya has now entered the "fog of war". Gaddafi's better-armed and better-organised forces have so far resisted successive offensives from the "rebels", and they have successfully adapted to Western airstrikes, notably by mingling with the Libyan population thus rendering airstrikes morally untenable and tactically limited. Without a change in the international coalition's strategy, civil war could plague Libya for years. Surely not much an improvement from autocratic oppression for most Libyans.

The fate of Libya – and its people – will be decided by the power of the gun. Yet, as important as the outcome of this conflict will be, there was perhaps more to learn from the diplomatic hubbub surrounding this conflict than there is from the deafening sound of gunshots and explosions. The vote on Resolution 1973 of the UN Security Council (UNSC) was more than a vote on the Libyan crisis. It was a telltale of the new global order in the making.

Why was the US so soft-spoken on Libya? Why did the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China) abstain in the UNSC? What does this tell us about the state of international relations? And what are the implications for the EU? Such are the questions that this *Security Policy Brief* tackles.

Understanding the BRIC Abstention

UNSC Resolution 1973 authorising "all necessary measures" to protect Libyan civilians from Muammar Gaddafi was voted by ten members while five members decided to abstain: Brazil, China, Germany, India and Russia, that is to say the BRIC countries plus Germany. This largely unexpected vote triggered many reactions and debates across the world. A better understanding of the reasons behind some key national positions is therefore necessary.

Overall, three factors had a significant impact on BRIC decision-making. First, at the personal level (which is often underestimated

in international relations), no BRIC leader was ever particularly comfortable with the person of Gaddafi. Second, at the national level, the defection of the Libyan ambassador to the UN calling overtly for sanctions against the Gaddafi regime was a strong signal to UNSC members, offering local legitimacy to the resolution. Third, at the regional level, the support of the Arab League for a no-fly-zone offered a key regional guarantee to UNSC members. In this context, the resolution appeared more acceptable to countries traditionally opposed to intervention.

Breaking down the UNSC vote, the abstention of China and Russia should be differentiated from the abstention of Brazil, Germany and India. As permanent members of the UNSC, they could indeed have used their veto power to oppose the resolution but instead chose to abstain. They did not hesitate to use their veto power in the past, notably on Zimbabwe and Myanmar, to oppose intervention, or the threat of the veto to water down resolutions, thus sometimes forcing the West to bypass the UN, like in Kosovo. This abstention can therefore be seen as a constructive vote – an implicit green light. Beijing and Moscow permitted the intervention, while protecting their necessary liberty to criticize the resolution and, more broadly, "Western interventionism" (Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin called it a "crusade", a term Medvedev deemed inappropriate).

It is true that the two countries do not have vital interests in Libya, at best minor economic interests. Nonetheless, this vote could signal a shift in Chinese diplomacy as there is simply no precedent of China supporting Western intervention based on purely humanitarian concerns or on the "responsibility to protect". One reading of the Chinese vote could be that due to the globalisation of China's interests, Beijing is now bound to act more responsibly in the international system, particularly in such cases where its vital interests are not at stake. Yet another reading of the vote suggests that China might have welcomed another conflict that could possibly engulf Western powers while Beijing could continue focussing on its own economic emergence and on strategic interests of its own. Both readings are in fact not incompatible. It should be emphasised nonetheless that China did not encourage a Western intervention; it probably even fears the long-term implications of a stronger (militarised) view on the "responsibility to protect" and "regime change" by Western decision-makers, as illustrated by China's recent call to halt airstrikes.

For Russia, traditionally opposed to the concept of "responsibility to protect", the vote on Libya was also a rather unusual position. In the absence of vital interests in Libya, one reading of the Russian position suggests that Moscow might have considered that its strategic partnership with France was at stake and that the preservation of this partnership was more important than its concerns about the "responsibility to protect" and "regime change", perhaps facilitated by good contacts between Russian president Dimitri Medvedev and French president Nicolas Sarkozy. The economic benefits from spiking prices of natural resources following the sanctions and the intervention in Libya were surely seen as a positive collateral effect of the resolution against Gaddafi. Another reading, similar to China, suggests that Moscow might have welcomed one more opportunity to engulf the West in another protracted conflict.

Brazil, Germany and India could not veto the resolution. Nevertheless, as the three countries are candidates for a permanent seat on the UNSC, they surely did not take their decision lightly as short-term negative consequences for their candidacy were to be expected. It is likely

that (some of) the reasons behind their abstention were similar to those behind the Chinese and Russian abstention: an absence of vital interest and a tradition of caution vis-à-vis intervention and the "responsibility to protect", although recognizing that Libya might be an exception, not least due to local and regional support for intervention.

"The case of Germany is undoubtedly the most puzzling one from a European point of view"

The case of Germany is undoubtedly the most puzzling one from a European point of view, for it created a divided European front on a resolution that had after all been put on the table by two other European members of the UNSC. This German dissension was even more puzzling – for Europeans as well as for external observers – because Libya is in Europe's own backyard, where stability and prosperity should be seen as matters of vital interest. There can only be speculations on the German vote, but one explanation could be a sort of *neo-Thatcherism*, as Germans "want their money back" and appear reluctant to spend their Euros on another dubious military adventure (particularly one led by the French and the British together), but perhaps also reluctant to see other countries spend their Euros on external intervention in times of economic austerity. This could explain why Germany opposed the intervention militarily (by refusing to contribute to the intervention) *and* politically (by refusing to support the resolution). Furthermore, there were obviously important electoral considerations, in light of Germany's shift of position after the latest elections to support the deployment of a CSDP humanitarian operation, even proposing a German contribution.

Finally, the support of some UNSC members for the resolution can be equally surprising as the abstention of others. This was particularly the case of South Africa and the other African members of the UNSC who decided to support the resolution in spite of the adoption days before of a conflicting plan of the African Union (AU) to settle the crisis peacefully and diplomatically – the AU has in fact been largely marginalised since the beginning of the crisis. The African countries were most likely under heavy international pressure, for their vote could tilt the balance in the Security Council and, at the same time, it was seen as a decisive African support to the coalition.

It should be pointed out that South Africa voted against the African Union, but also against the BRIC (of which it is now a member in the new grouping BRICS, since December 2010). This confirms that there was no coordinated position among the BRICS. Although the BRIC(S) countries share some similar concerns over (the intervention in) Libya, their vote was rather the accidental result of different reasoning than of a coordinated voting strategy.

A Post-American World

The vote on Libya reflects to a certain extent the new international order that is taking shape. This international order in the making is less dominated by Washington as it becomes more multipolar, and it is less predictable as emerging powers grasp new strategic opportunities to push forward their influence and ultimately their interests.

First characteristic of the new international

order: it seems less and less American as illustrated by the relatively discrete profile adopted by Washington on the whole Libyan crisis – and the Arab uprisings in general. Part of the explanation for this discrete profile lies in the personality of Barack Obama who has developed a much more cautious approach to international problems in comparison with his predecessor, particularly in the Arab world. As the 2012 presidential election is nearing, Obama seems also unwilling to wage another unpopular war. Another important explanatory factor is the American reluctance to commit to another potential long war, after the disastrous experiences in Afghanistan and in Iraq – both conflicts which were supposed to end quickly, like Libya.

"The vote on Libya reflects to a certain extent the new international order that is taking shape"

Yet, there is inevitably a third explanation for America's discrete profile on Libya: the US is slowly losing its uncontested hegemony in international security, notably due to the so-called *multipolarization* of the international order. This looks very much like the "post-American world" described by Fareed Zakaria. The US is now less interventionist by choice *and* by necessity – in this new international order, Washington must choose carefully its priorities in terms of foreign policy for it is simply no longer able to be present simultaneously on every front, let alone to lead. The soft-spoken American posture is a clear political choice related to domestic pressures but it is also a matter of necessity, as the phantoms of military and economic overstretch are present in all minds.

The Libyan crisis was a first illustration of what happens when the US takes a backseat. Europe and the emerging powers are just discovering what this "post-American world" means in practice. This is a world of strategic opportunities where established and emerging powers can increasingly pursue their own agenda, independently from the US. The era of "you are with us or against us" is inevitably over. For now, Europe is in the driving seat and in spite of the chaotic ride due to intra-European divisions, America still feels pretty safe. But from Brasilia to Beijing, world leaders are contemplating this new American posture with interest. Could they be next in the driving seat?

Second characteristic: the emerging global order is probably more fragmented than during the previous bipolar era. Emerging powers have become sufficiently assertive to confront the West on some issues (sometimes individually, sometimes as a bloc), but remain prudent enough to avoid endangering their rise by investing too much in revisionist postures. This fragmentation makes international cooperation to solve global challenges more difficult. On the other hand, the world is increasingly interdependent and interconnected as largely illustrated by the recent economic crisis. Global interdependence per se is not new, but according to some scholars today's interdependence is creating favourable conditions for international cooperation, for there is simply no alternative to address some of the most pressing global challenges. Thus, at the moment, the tension between factors of fragmentation (possibly leading to a fracture?) and cohesion maintains the international system in flux and makes it less predictable.

The vote on Libya offered an encouraging signal with Russia and China constructively abstaining rather than using their veto power. Whether this constructive posture will develop as the rule or will remain an exception remains to be seen. As emerging powers continue to build their global footprint and to develop global interests, they are more likely to develop a sophisticated foreign policy. Yet the direction of such foreign policy remains unclear.

Lessons for the EU

London and Paris were right to make the case for an intervention in Libya in the first place, strategically, morally and legally. A more assertive policy in Europe's neighbourhood was long overdue, although a long-term strategy for the region, beyond the current operations, is still awaited. Libya has proved nonetheless that European Member States alone (in this case, France and the UK, followed by a few other European countries, including Belgium) are unable to sustain the responsibility and the costs of a full-fledged air-sea-and-ground operation. In other words, without the US, Europe still seems unable to impose order in its own backyard. The lesson should be that it is only when acting together – at the EU level – that all conditions for a sustainable intervention can be fulfilled, i.e. legitimacy, capabilities and cost-sharing.

Libya is no country for old powers. If Europe wants to weigh in the post-American world, it needs to come together as a new power: the EU. Of course, if the EU wants to become a global power, it first needs to assert itself as a power in its own region. This implies a vision, political will, and money.

The world beyond Libya is vast, however. While a stable neighbourhood is in the EU's interest, Brussels should not forget its true long-term objective, which is to secure its power status on the global stage. To do so, the EU needs to develop a *grand strategy* that clearly states the interests it seeks to pursue and how to prioritise them, as well as sub-strategies for relevant regions of interest, including the Mediterranean region, and vis-à-vis key third players, notably the BRICS.

The case of Libya clearly demonstrates how detrimental the lack of grand strategy can be to the EU as an intervention in Libya was considered of vital importance by some Member States yet not so much by others. Article 34 of the Lisbon Treaty reads: "Member States which are members of the Security Council will, in the execution of their functions, defend the positions and the interests of the Union". But in the absence of grand strategy, it is simply left to the Member States to decide on an ad hoc basis what the EU's interests are, resulting in uncertainty and confusion for Europe and its partners.

"While a stable neighbourhood is in the EU's interest, Brussels should not forget its true long-term objective: to secure its power status on the global stage"

There is little that the EU can hope to achieve alone, without the support of other established and emerging powers. The UNSC resolution on Libya was a foretaste of the post-American world. In order to pursue its interests and to cope with global challenges, the EU needs to develop effective sub-strategies vis-à-vis established and emerging powers. In theory, the EU already has ten strategic partnerships with key third countries (Brazil, Canada, China,

India, Japan, Mexico, South Africa, South Korea, Russia and the US) but these partnerships have lacked implementation. President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy initiated a rethink of these strategic partnerships in 2010, but concrete measures are still expected.

The Libyan crisis showed once again that Europe cannot just rely on the US. The EU needs to become an autonomous power, pursuing its own grand strategy. Of course, the EU cannot solve all international challenges on its own, and as it emerges as a global power, it will need reliable allies and true strategic partners. In the Libyan case, emerging powers were ready to assume a constructive role in international security. As it is unclear yet whether such constructive behaviour will be the rule or the exception, the EU needs to develop true strategic partnerships to encourage such behaviour in the future. Together, the EU and its strategic partners can establish a safer and more prosperous world order.

Thomas Renard is a Research Fellow in the Europe in the World Programme at Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations.

The Security Policy Brief is a publication of Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations

EGMONT
Royal Institute for International Relations
Naamsestraat 69
1000 Brussels
BELGIUM

> www.egmontinstitute.be