

Revolution and the power of change

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Which major power has most at stake in the Arab revolutions: the US, China or India? Egypt's protests were widely seen as a test of American foreign policy. But the Libyan crisis has shaken decision-makers in Beijing and New Delhi as well as Washington.

China and India are both significant customers for Libyan oil and gas, and roughly 30,000 Chinese citizens and 20,000 Indians lived in Libya before the troubles began. Last month, New Delhi ordered warships to the Mediterranean to rescue its nationals, while Beijing organised similar evacuations.

Historians may come to see the Libyan crisis as a pivotal moment in China and India's rise as global powers. There has recently been copious commentary about the new Asian economic superpowers' investments in Africa and the Middle East - and criticism of their ties to unstable leaders such as Sudan's Omar al Bashir and Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe. They have rarely paid a political price for these risky relationships.

Yet Libya's implosion has shown how India and China's expanding economic presence makes them vulnerable to the fall-out from far-away events. Ten years ago, a conflict in the southern Mediterranean would have been dismissed as something for the US and Europeans to resolve. But as the fighting in Libya threatens economic recovery elsewhere, it quickly became a global problem. The Asian powers' reliance on Middle Eastern oil meant that they had to be involved in stemming the crisis.

After initial reluctance, China and India backed US-led efforts to put pressure on Colonel Qaddafi through the United Nations Security Council. In doing so, they shifted away from defending non-interference in state's sovereign affairs - a position they had previously used in Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka. Brazil, which has opposed UN sanctions against Iran, was also happy to approve their use against Qaddafi.

"The Council was slow to act at the start, but it put pressure on the Libyan regime and sent a firm message to other leaders tempted to use violence," says Salman Shaikh, a former UN official and director of the Brookings Doha Center, a think-tank. "This has to make China reconsider its role both in the region and the multilateral system," he adds.

Shaikh was in the UAE recently for a conference hosted by New York University's Abu Dhabi Institute on the state of the international system. The event, which I had a hand in organising, ranged over topics from inter-governmental cooperation against terrorists to coordination to mitigate the effects of rising food prices. But two subjects were uppermost in the minds of the participants, who included officials and experts from the US, China, India and Brazil.

First, how are non-Western powers reshaping international organisations such as the UN? Second, what do the events in the Arab world tell us about those organisations' health?

The first of these questions has become standard fare at international conferences of this type. Since 2008, when the leaders of the world's biggest economies first met in the G20 format to head off a depression, it's been accepted the emerging powers have a decisive say in how the world works. It's also been assumed that these powers are happy to bargain over economics, but don't want to cooperate on "Western" issues like human rights. Even democracies like India and Brazil have treated US and European interest in such topics as proof of a colonialist hangover.

Some Western policymakers have willingly dropped these issues for the sake of smoother cooperation on financial issues. After Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, it's not possible to keep quiet about political values. At last month's conference, one Chinese participant teasingly asked his US counterparts if the revolutions in North Africa didn't validate George W Bush's "freedom agenda."

In reality, the fast-moving wave of protests has created huge uncertainties all over the world. Bruce Jones, director of NYU's Center on International Cooperation, argues that officials in Russia, China and India are as "worried as the US about oil prices and violent instability - but unlike US policymakers, they don't have an instinctive fondness for democratising forces".

The revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East have thus highlighted two features of the evolving world order. On the one hand, non-Western powers are certainly now global players, with economic stakes scattered far and wide.

On the other hand, the rising powers' economic connections now look unexpectedly insecure. American leverage may be in question in Egypt and Libya, but the emerging powers' ability to shape events by themselves has been minimal, which is one reason that all powers ended up collaborating at the UN.

In fact, it's arguable that Colonel Qaddafi did the major powers a favour by pushing the Libyan crisis to its limits - while Washington and Beijing may not see eye to eye on democracy, they were able to agree that Qaddafi had broken all humanitarian principles.

What comes next? The optimistic answer is that the spirit of reasonable, if far from perfect, international cooperation engendered by Qaddafi will continue. In this scenario, Western and non-Western officials will work together to assist other Arab countries respond to protesters with reforms rather than violence. Pessimists fear that, having realised the limits of their influence, the US and emerging powers will vie for influence over the new governments emerging in region - destabilising the nascent democracies.

How can such unhealthy competition be avoided? To answer that, it's necessary to reckon with two all-too-familiar sources of international tension: human rights and oil.

Bruce Jones argues that both non-Western governments and the US need to recalibrate their attitude to democracy. Policymakers in Beijing and Delhi must see that "lukewarm support" to democrats in places like Tunis and Cairo will be counterproductive. But the US must grasp that "it didn't create these democracies and it doesn't control them."

Giovanni Grevi, a foreign policy expert at the Spanish think-tank FRIDE, argues that the governments should find a "Cairo Consensus" on supporting democratic transitions in the Arab world. This could involve agreeing ground-rules on promoting the rule of law or economic reforms.

If this is optimistic it's not incredible. China has put its weight behind South Sudan's vote to secede from Khartoum - a process also backed by the US - in part to secure energy interests.

Yet, as many participants noted at last month's conference, getting to any sort of international consensus is complicated by the big powers' own energy needs. The impact of the Libyan crisis on the price of oil is a reminder of how vulnerable all the world's major economies are to fluctuations in the energy markets. Yet while this is an area of shared vulnerability, there's no shared mechanism for all the big powers to discuss the problem.

Energy producers sit in Opec while Western oil consumers gather at the International Energy Agency (IEA). This institutional set up worked fine as long as the West was the main market for oil and gas. Yet Brazil, China and India are in neither group - meaning that they fear that they'll be outmanoeuvred for desperately-needed energy resources. That makes talking about a crisis in any energy-rich country unnecessarily complicated.

According to Antonio Ramalho, a Brazilian professor of international relations, "we have a choice between allowing competition to evolve freely, which may lead us to conflicts, or trying to establish frameworks in which differences can be negotiated peacefully." Bruce Jones agrees that "we need a forum that brings together energy producers and consumers more effectively, or the political and economic damage done by wild swings in energy prices will worsen."

Zhang Tuosheng, a senior fellow at the China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies, suggests that there are some fairly straightforward steps towards erecting these frameworks. The emerging powers can be informally introduced into the IEA, he says, and the IEA should also strengthen its lines of communication with Opec. Meanwhile the G20, having contained the financial crisis, could now discuss energy security as well.

Not everyone is so sure that creating or adapting intergovernmental mechanisms is the real answer to the energy problem. Ramalho emphasises that governments must have the political will to revise the ways energy is used at home, rather than pass the buck to international institutions. Stephen Krasner, a professor at Stanford University who was director of policy planning in the US State Department from 2005 and 2007, worries that "if you give institutions too many responsibilities, you can break them." Bringing energy politics into the G20 could ultimately poison it.

Yet just as the 2008 financial crisis forced major world economies to cooperate closely at the G20 and the violence in Libya made them cooperate in the Security Council, this year's rise in oil prices may make them collaborate better on energy issues. This in turn may be the necessary quid pro quo for international cooperation to support emerging Arab democracies, rather than embarking on a dangerous contest for their affections.

At a moment when so many powers are in crisis management mode, it is hard for policy-makers to get a grip on these strategic issues. But if they manage to instigate changes in how big powers cooperate on human rights and energy, the protestors of Tunis, Cairo and Benghazi will have reshaped not just their region but the rules of an insecure world order.

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