



## RISING POWERS INITIATIVE

**SIGUR CENTER FOR ASIAN STUDIES**

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## Worldviews of Rising Powers: What Does Their Policy on the Libyan Intervention Tell Us?

Upon first glance, China, Russia and India appear to be reacting rather similarly to developments in the Middle East and North Africa, and to US policy responses in the region. Take Libya for an example. All three of these major powers supported the initial sanctions on Libya, abstained on the UN Security Council resolution that authorized military intervention, and then criticized the subsequent military actions. This is consistent with the sensitivities of these countries over issues of sovereignty and non-intervention. However, a closer examination of the domestic policy orientations of these three countries shows that the variation in their motives has important implications for US policy in managing its interests in the region and its bilateral relations with these major powers.

### **China**

Chinese foreign policymaking has consistently assumed a realist, pragmatic posture, aimed at building China into a major world power. In response to the wave of protests across North Africa and the Middle East, China's primary concerns have been to avoid any precedents that might affect a similar future uprising in China, to

evacuate its overseas workers, and to ensure the security of its investments in the region. On Libya, it was no surprise that China did not support military intervention, since it has always espoused a doctrine of non-intervention. What was more unusual was that China chose to abstain rather than veto the UN Security Council resolution, and that it had even voted in favor of the earlier UN sanctions on Libya.

This can be understood in the context of China's recent efforts to repair its relations with the rest of the world, after a series of aggressive actions in 2009-2010 resulted in what David Shambaugh characterizes as "the worst year in Chinese foreign relations in a decade." Chinese President Hu Jintao's recent state visit to the United States exemplifies this effort to recalibrate relations with the U.S., and China's position on Libya can be seen as a continuation of this effort. Although China has and will continue to express opposition to the use of force, its pragmatic orientation does not let this issue get in the way of its relationships with major powers. Just a few days after the airstrikes on Libya began, Hu Jintao met

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This Policy Brief is based on a briefing on "Foreign Policy Debates within Rising Powers: Current Implications for the US," held at the Elliott School of International Affairs on March 2, 2011. The public event was moderated by Henry R. Nau, Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University, and featured the following experts:

- Andrew Kuchins (Center for Strategic and International Studies)
- Deepa Ollapally (Sigur Center for Asian Studies)
- David Shambaugh (The Elliott School of International Affairs)

with French President Nicholas Sarkozy in Beijing and the two leaders pledged to strengthen bilateral economic ties, even while Hu reiterated China's stance on Libya.

## Russia

In Russia, the predominant intellectual orientation has seen "a lot of volatility" in the past twenty years, according to Andrew Kuchins. Today's foreign policymaking is dominated by realists who believe in great power balancing, although domestic debates see a growing influence of nationalists who emphasize Russian exceptionalism and take a more antagonistic stance toward the West.

Indeed, these tensions in contemporary Russia were evident in the heated domestic debates on Russia's abstention on the UN resolution, and by extension the overall direction of Russian foreign policy. Most tellingly, there has been an apparent split between President Dmitry Medvedev and Premier Vladimir Putin on this issue, with the former defending Russia's abstention and the latter lambasting the military intervention as a sign of US hegemony. Commentaries in the media also indicate sharp disagreements amongst public intellectuals on whether Russia is or should be a clear regional or global power, and whether Russia's position on developments in the Middle East and North Africa might affect the "re-set" in its relations with the U.S.

With regard to the prospects of democracy in the region, Russia has a long tradition of skepticism, and an even stronger skepticism of democracy in Islamic countries. There has also been a tendency to overestimate the role of the United States in encouraging or enabling uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and other countries in the region. What all this actually reveals, argues Kuchins, is a deep sensitivity about Russia's own vulnerability.

## India

Like China and Russia, India abstained on UN Resolution No. 1973 and then criticized the

military intervention in Libya. At the same time, the Indian government's open praise for the general prospects of democracy in the region stands in stark contrast with the cynicism or reticence of China and Russia. This position is consistent with India's pride in its own democracy as well as its

nationalist and left-of-center foreign policy orientation, which values national autonomy and foreign policy independence, and would thus be reluctant to enter any alliance with other great powers. The nationalist perspective is also characterized by a moralistic streak and a belief in India's innate importance, including a sense of pride in India's uniqueness as the world's largest democracy.

However, as Deepa M. Ollapally and Rajesh Rajagopalan point out, a growing voice for pragmatism in Indian foreign policy is posing challenges to the traditional nationalists. This pragmatic outlook emphasizes national interests now defined in economic and increasingly strategic terms, shuns ideological positions such as non-alignment, and accepts the value of political and military partnerships. They believe that building closer ties with the United States is an important way of hedging against

China, but only when the strategic interest is clear. Rhetoric aside, promoting democracy in

the Middle East may not be in India's national

interest, especially considering the growing

North African migrant worker population in the Gulf

States.

## Implications for US Foreign Policy

Understanding the foreign policy orientations of China, Russia and India helps us make sense of how these countries react and behave on important international issues, such as the recent developments in the Middle East and North Africa. The particular orientation of each country acts like an "intellectual center of gravity," according to Henry R. Nau, that is both mediated by the external environment and reflects the internal political situation of the country. An appreciation of the intellectual and ideological basis of policymaking in these major powers then has

***"Examining the domestic policy orientations of China, Russia and India shows that the variation in their motives has important implications for US policy in managing its interests in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as its bilateral relations with these three major powers."***

implications for how the US manages its relations with them.

The realism and pragmatism in Chinese foreign policymaking means that the Chinese leadership will continue its efforts toward maintaining a stable relationship with the U.S. However, the US should not have any illusions of a G-2 partnership with China, says Shambaugh. Furthermore, China is simultaneously playing a "global competition game" on strategic, diplomatic and commercial fronts. This is evident in the Middle East, where China's economic presence is growing. Thus, as the US responds to and manages the potentially sweeping changes in the region, it will be important to consider how China's management of its relations there will affect the US role in the medium to long term.

With Russia, its mixed reactions to Moscow's stance on Libya reflect the continued sense of uncertainty about Russia's role in global politics. This serves as a reminder that the "re-set" in US-Russia relations cannot be taken for granted, despite important milestones such as the recent signing of the new START treaty. It is too early to say whether the intellectual orientation of Russia's foreign policymaking might evolve, but its domestic vulnerability, coupled with possible changes in its external geopolitical environment, means that Russia will continue to behave as a "price taker, not a price maker" in international politics, according to Kuchins.

India perhaps offers the best chance of substantive cooperation in the region, despite its current reluctance or even aversion to such an idea. The growing influence of pragmatists in the country's intellectual landscape means that there will be increasing support for strengthening relations with the United States, despite the inclination of traditional nationalists to avoid alliance politics. India's economic interests in the Gulf states make a practical case for a more active Indian foreign policy in the region, which could complement its strategic preference for hedging against China's influence. US policymakers should consider whether this opens avenues for substantive cooperation with India in the critical Middle East region.

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