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Fall of Gaddafi: Policy challenge for China and Russia

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

The impending fall of Gaddafi's regime and takeover of Tripoli by the Libyan rebels pose a policy challenge for China and Russia in their support for autocratic leaders in the Arab world.

Commentary

THE IMPENDING victory of NATO-backed rebels over the military forces of Colonel Moammar Gaddafi throughout Libya and the effective takeover of Tripoli by the rebel Transition National Council (TNC) pose a significant policy challenge for China and Russia with regard to their support for autocratic leaders in the Middle East and North Africa.

China and Russia have had to scramble to repair relations with the rebels and salvage future economic ties in the wake of the fall of the Libyan capital even as Gaddafi and his son Saif al Islam vowed to make a last stand in southern Libya. Russia, in recognition of the realities on the ground, has belatedly recognised the TNC as the legal authority in Libya. Both Russia and China sent high level delegations to a recent Friend of Libya conference in Paris at which NATO members discussed the reconstruction of post-Gaddafi Libya with the TNC.

On the losing side

Policymakers in Beijing and Moscow are likely to seek to ensure that they do not end up on the losing side elsewhere in the region, particularly in Syria. The need to reevaluate policy was driven home recently when Abdeljalil Mayouf, manager of the rebel-controlled Arabian Gulf Oil Company (AGOCO), warned that China, Russia and Brazil, in contrast to Western nations, could face political obstacles in restoring business ties once Gaddafi has been removed from power.

The TNC has said that it would honour all existing contracts, but only after investigating whether corruption was involved in those deals. That gives the council considerable leeway as members of Gaddafi's family or close associates were involved in virtually every deal concluded during his rule.

China, Russia and Brazil as well as India and South Africa refrained from voting at the United Nations Security Council in March in favour of the imposition of a no-fly zone in Libya and calls for Gaddafi's resignation. They were also critical of NATO airstrikes aimed at weakening the former Libyan leader's grip on power as well as the supply of military aid to the rebels. The five Security Council members are now at pains to clarify that they did not block the Security Council's endorsement of the no-fly zone. To counter perceptions that they had failed to support the rebels, China and Russia point out that they have maintained contact with the rebels throughout

the seven-month crisis and held talks with the rebel leadership in Benghazi as well as in Beijing and Moscow.

Concerned Chinese officials have called on the rebel leadership to protect the country's investments in Libya. The chairman of the Russian parliament's international affairs committee, Konstantin Kosachev, cautioned that Russia would not be able to compete with companies from NATO member countries for Libyan oil projects. This was because a rebel-controlled government would give priority to the NATO countries in distributing contracts to rebuild the Libyan economy. "Neither China, nor Russia nor South Africa or any other country, which did not participate in this 'humanitarian operation,' will be able to compete with the NATO countries on equal terms," Mr. Kosachev told Russia's RT.com.

Syria dilemma

Although embattled Syrian president Bashar al Assad is likely to hold on to power longer than Gaddafi, China, Russia, India, Brazil and South Africa realise that they will face a similar dilemma once he too falls. Hence they are likely to seek to ensure that they are better positioned than in Libya. The five powers may however find it more difficult to recover ground in Syria if there is a change of regime. Unlike in Libya, they cannot claim to have done anything to stop the Syrian crackdown on anti-government protesters nor made any public contact with Assad's opponents.

It took five months of bloodshed before they endorsed a Security Council statement critical of Assad's crackdown. Russia criticised the crackdown for the first time only last month while China has yet to comment. All five countries were quick to reject the calls by the United States and the European Union on Assad to step down.

Commentators have noted that Asia's and particularly China's commercial interests in Libya are limited and are likely to avow the same with regard to Syria in time. China sourced only three percent of its crude imports from Libya but had to evacuate from Libya 36,000 workers employed by 75 primarily state-owned Chinese companies earlier this year.

Even if commercial ties with Libya and Syria are relatively miniscule, there is still a lot more at stake for China, Russia, India, Brazil and South Africa across the Middle East and North Africa. Beyond chancing that their companies will be at a disadvantage in competing for post-revolution contracts, the five countries risk negative perceptions in the region. The millions who are closely monitoring events in Libya and Syria are likely to be inspired by the downfall of Gaddafi -- the third Arab leader to be toppled this year.

U-turn unlikely

The civil war in Libya was preceded by mass protests in Tunisia and Egypt that ousted their presidents earlier this year. The grievances that propelled the rebellion in Libya and the protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Syria are shared by other Arab populations from North Africa to the Gulf and are likely to generate change across the region over the next decade.

China and Russia are not likely to make a U-turn from now and openly support popular revolts and their demands for greater political freedom and economic opportunity. They are, however, less likely to give autocratic leaders licence to crack down violently on protesters as they did in the case of Syria -- if only to ensure that they do not end up on the wrong side of history.

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