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## The UN Security Council response to the Libyan crisis: Implications for the African Agenda

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*This foreign policy brief looks at the international response to the Libyan crisis and what it means for South Africa's efforts to promote the African agenda in the UN Security Council. It argues that given the continuous political hegemony of Western powers in the UNSC and the national interest preoccupations of South Africa's emerging economy partners, strengthening African institutions to take the lead in preventing and responding expediently to crises on the continent presents the most viable strategy for defending the peace and security interests of Africa in the UNSC. South Africa thus needs to adopt a more assertive diplomacy in Africa as part of its African agenda.*

### Introduction

The popular uprisings that have swept across the Middle East and North Africa have not only altered the political landscape of the region, but have also revealed much about the calculations and behaviour of actors in the emerging global order. The international response to the Libyan rebellion, in particular, has been as instructive of contemporary international power relations as it was controversial. On 31 October 2011, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) officially terminated its six-month military campaign in Libya as a result of UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1973. The contentious resolution authorised the imposition of a no-fly zone over Libya and the adoption of "all necessary measures" to protect the Libyan civilian population from Muammar Gaddafi. With Gaddafi having been killed, the Libyan people have been left to grapple with the challenge of constituting a post-autocratic nation. For the South African foreign policy community, with a stake in defending the interests of Africa in the UNSC, a postscript to the international response to the Libyan crisis is in order, especially as Pretoria prepares for the second and last lap of its current residency in the UNSC. The objective of this foreign policy brief is to examine the response of the UNSC to the Libyan crisis and the implications of this for South Africa's strategies in promoting the African agenda.

*Global Insight* aims to provide members of the policy community with concise but trenchant analyses of topical issues. Comments and suggestions are invited.

### The making of UN Resolution 1973: A brief review of the positions of key actors

On 26 February 2011, a week after Gaddafi violently suppressed peaceful demonstrations in the opposition stronghold of Benghazi and vowed to crush the rebellion that was taking root in the east of Libya, the UNSC passed Resolution 1970, which condemned the regime's actions and called for an immediate end to civilian attacks. In addition to referring the Libyan crisis to the International Criminal Court, Resolution 1970 also imposed an arms embargo on Libya, as well as targeted sanctions on key figures of Muammar Gaddafi's regime. As the determination for victory on the sides of both the Libyan government and the rebels intensified and triggered more civilian casualties, the UNSC on 17 March 2011 adopted a second resolution in response to the Libyan crisis. Resolution 1973 authorised the imposition of a no-fly zone over Libya and the use of "all necessary measures" to protect Libyan civilians from Gaddafi's regime. This resolution was later to provide the justification for NATO's bombardment of Libya and the provision, by some of its members, of other kinds of military assistance to the rebels, which ultimately culminated in the ousting and execution of Gaddafi.

Resolution 1973 was passed in the UNSC with ten affirmative votes, five abstentions and no objections. Even so, its implementation has since been accompanied by global recriminations involving members of the Council such as South Africa, China and Russia who either voted in its favour or refrained from vetoing it. The controversial international response to the Libyan debacle provides significant insight into the emerging global power relations from which South Africa could draw valuable lessons on how to leverage its UNSC seat to promote the African agenda. Before examining the implications of these events for the African agenda, it makes sense to first proceed with a brief review of the positions and behaviour of some of the key actors in the making and implementation of Resolution 1973.

#### *Was Resolution 1973 another strategic masterpiece from the West?*

Of all the positions adopted in the Security Council regarding Resolution 1973, that of France, the UK and the US appears to be the most consistent, best thought-out and least ambiguous. France, the UK and Lebanon sponsored Resolution 1973, with the support of the US, and took the lead in the military campaign that

gave substance to it. Although seemingly obscured, the role played by the US in making and accomplishing the resolution was as decisive as that of its European allies, considering its centrality in NATO. Giving due diligence to the manner in which the resolution was carefully worded and subsequently implemented, it is difficult to dismiss claims that the Western permanent members (P3) of the Council had ulterior motives in pushing for the resolution besides the stated humanitarian objectives.

#### *BRICS member states' uncharacteristic and uncoordinated stance*

The different stances adopted by BRICS member states on the Libyan resolution were, to say the least, unanticipated and leave many unanswered questions. Regardless of the obvious loopholes carefully crafted into Resolution 1973, South Africa uncharacteristically voted in favour of the resolution,<sup>1</sup> citing the imperative to prevent further bloodshed. It later also took the lead in condemning what it considered to be the abuse of the Security Council measure by the P3. While all the other BRICS countries opted for an abstention, it is the positions of veto-wielding Russia and China that raise the most serious questions. Why did neither Beijing nor Moscow, which have traditionally been reluctant to concede to the responsibility to protect doctrine as grounds for military intervention, veto the resolution or use the threat thereof to water down its language? What national interest considerations informed the votes of Russia and China, and how well did these coincide or compete with the aspirations of the P3 or the need for BRICS to act as a collective?

#### *The reticence and ambiguity of the African Union*

Although the African Union (AU) is technically not represented in the UNSC, the position it adopted – or failed to adopt – was crucial in determining the Council's response to the Libyan crisis. As the conflict unfolded, the AU condemned Gaddafi's crackdown on civilians and established a high-level panel to mediate in the crisis. On 10 March 2011, a week before Resolution 1973 was passed, the AU released a 'road map' which discouraged military intervention in favour of a political solution to the conflict. Some observers and sympathisers of the continental body have inferred from this that the AU had adopted a position against the no-fly zone.<sup>2</sup> This line of argument has been contested by at least one of Africa's representatives in the UNSC<sup>3</sup> and seems less plausible if

the divisions within the AU over the Libyan crisis<sup>4</sup> and the absence of an official communiqué that speaks directly to the draft resolution are factored into the debate. The ambiguity of the AU's position is brought out even better by China's rationalisation for not using its veto. According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Beijing had serious reservations with portions of the resolution but opted to defer to the "concerns and stances of Arab countries and the *African Union* as well as the special circumstances in Libya".<sup>5</sup>

### Implications for the African Agenda

The manipulation, scheming and tepidity that were seen to characterise the international response to the Libyan crisis hold significant lessons for South Africa's efforts to promote the peace and security agenda of Africa in the UNSC. Firstly, the adoption of Resolution 1973, as faulty as it was, underscores the limitations to the agency of temporary members of the Security Council like South Africa, imposed by the disproportionate distribution of power in the Council. In another sense, the Libyan debacle suggests that even as the US is seen to display caution in its international role, its European allies are determined to ride on its enduring military prowess to reassert their authority in areas where their interests seem threatened. Needless to say, Africa has and will remain an obvious target.

Secondly, the failure of China and Russia to exercise their right of veto or of the BRICS member states, generally, to coordinate their positions underlines the divergent national interest considerations of emerging economies, which continue to limit their potential to constitute an alternative power pole to counter the political hegemony of the West. What this means is that, contrary to what might have been hoped for when South Africa joined the BRICS club, Pretoria cannot safely depend on its emerging power allies for the promotion of the African agenda in the UNSC.

The third and perhaps most important point relates to the weakness and inertia displayed by the AU during the Libyan crisis. That the AU was unable to authoritatively speak with one voice and take full charge to resolve a conflict in its own backyard does not portend well for efforts to stem instability or external intervention on the continent. The institutional weaknesses and divisions within the AU, which made it difficult for it to respond expediently to the crisis or even make an unambiguous

pronouncement on the no-fly zone, created enough room for opportunistic tendencies to prevail and, arguably, constitute the most serious threat to the peace and stability of Africa.

In light of the foregoing, South Africa's African agenda campaign in the UNSC would be better served if Pretoria adopts a more assertive diplomatic stance in Africa. The entrenched hegemony of the permanent members of the UNSC is something that will not be dislodged in the foreseeable future. And the Libyan crisis has shown once again that Western powers are not shy to make use of this hegemony to promote their interests, especially in a continent that is perceived to be lacking leadership. South Africa's success in the UNSC thus depends primarily on how well it fills this leadership vacuum in Africa, using the collective voice of the continent as a counterweight to the dominance and manipulation of the West in the Council. This is where the legacy of South Africa's previous UNSC term becomes relevant. A prudent approach to defending the African agenda in the Security Council should build on earlier gains to ensure better coordination between the Council and regional peace and security structures on the continent. This regionalisation of the UNSC, so to speak, would ensure that African initiatives and processes take precedence on matters of the continent, sparing its people of the kind of embarrassment that came with the NATO intervention in Libya.

However, success in this area cannot be optimised without the corresponding will to address the institutional weaknesses of regional organisations in Africa. For South Africa, defending the African agenda in the UNSC should therefore begin in Addis Ababa and not in New York. If Pretoria is really committed to leveraging its presence in the Security Council, and for that matter, other multilateral fora to guarantee stability and development in Africa, it is certainly time to rethink its broader Africa strategy and reinforce its diplomatic efforts on the continent. Africa needs leadership in order to build strong institutions that can hold the continent together and withstand external pressures, and South Africa has the capabilities to provide such leadership. The old cliché that South Africa has to tone down its diplomacy in Africa, so as not to be seen as a hegemon, has outlived its relevance and is unsuitable for the current challenges facing the continent. This is not an argument for exercising unrestrained military or economic power, or engaging in arrogant diplomacy. It is rather a case for translating South Africa's vision for Africa into

an assertive posture on the continent, which would put an end to the excessive caution that has seen Pretoria shy away from optimally exercising its *de facto* leadership role in Africa.

### Policy considerations

- **Renewed focus on continental institutional building:** South Africa needs to complement its efforts in the UN Security Council with a vigorous campaign to strengthen regional and sub-regional organisations and institutions in Africa. A good starting point would be to heed previous recommendations for the “infiltration” of African multilateral organisations with sufficiently experienced diplomats who are able not just to articulate and defend the values underpinning the African agenda, but also skilled enough to engage with their African counterparts in the spirit of collegiality. This, of course, should be accompanied by a willingness to reasonably shoulder the financial burden of these organisations.
- **Strategic alliances with like-minded African states:** Forging strategic political partnerships with key states in all regions of Africa is also crucial for developing and promoting a shared vision and agenda for the continent, which is a prerequisite for efficient institutions. The choice of partners should be diversified to include not only regional economic and military powerhouses but also small states with an enlightened elite class.
- **Support regional and continental civil society networks:** Strong and efficient institutions cannot be guaranteed in Africa without the activism of a well-resourced and coordinated civil society sector. South Africa’s Africa policy should thus prioritise support for national and transnational civil society networks. This could be made one of the key objectives of the proposed development aid agency.
- **Operationalisation of the African Standby Force:** Finally, Pretoria should provide leadership in fast-tracking the operationalisation of the continental peacekeeping force, while working towards ensuring that there is sufficient synergy between the latter and the UN peacekeeping system as contemplated in Chapter VIII of the UN Charter.

### Notes

- 1 South Africa’s vote in favour of Resolution 1973 was unexpected given its disapproval of the manipulation of UN resolutions by Western powers to foster their own agendas.
- 2 Refer to President Yoweri Museveni’s article “Libya needs dialogue”, *ANC Today*, 11(12), April 2011.
- 3 See the comments of Baleka Mbete (the ANC Chairperson) on President Museveni’s claim that the AU had made a pronouncement on the draft resolution in: “We can’t take a neutral stance”, *ANC Today*, 11(13), April 2011.
- 4 Senegal, Ethiopia and Rwanda are among the African countries which expressed support for NATO’s actions in Libya pursuant to Resolution 1973.
- 5 See the transcript of the press conference given by the spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry on 22 March 2011, available at <http://www.chinaembassy-fi.org/eng/fyrth/t809578.htm>.