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Russia and China challenge NATO

By M K Bhadrakumar
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Consultations by Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi in Moscow at the weekend were expected to prepare the ground for the visit by President Hu Jintao to Russia next month. In the event, however, they assumed a character of immense significance to international security.

Sustained Russian-Chinese efforts to "coordinate" their stance on regional and international issues have been taken to a qualitatively new level with regard to the developing Middle East situation.

The official Russian news agency used an unusual expression - "tight cooperation" - to characterize the new template to which their coordination of regional policies had been taken. This is bound to pose a big challenge to the West to pursue its unilateralist agenda in the Middle East.

Hu's visit to Russia is notionally to attend the showcase event in St Petersburg on June 16-18, which the Kremlin has been carefully choreographing as an annual event in the nature of "Russia's Davos" - titled the International Economic Forum. Much excitement is evident in both countries that Hu's visit will be a turning point in China-Russia energy cooperation.

Russia's energy giant Gazprom hopes to pump 30 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually to China by 2015 and the negotiations over the pricing are at an advanced stage. Chinese officials maintain that the stalled negotiations are finally going to be wrapped up with an agreement by the time Hu arrives in Russia.

Indeed, when the world's fastest-growing major economy and the world's biggest energy exporter come to an agreement, it goes far beyond a matter of bilateral cooperation. There will be uneasiness in Europe, which has been historically Russia's principal market for energy exports, that a "competitor" is appearing in the East and the West's energy business with Russia would have China as a "sleeping partner". This paradigm shift provides a backdrop to the East-West tensions over the Middle East.

Identical position

The Middle East and North Africa turned out to be the leitmotif of Yang's talks in Moscow with his host Sergei Lavrov. Russia and China decided to work together in addressing the issues arising out of the upheaval in the Middle East and North Africa. Lavrov said: "We have agreed to coordinate our actions using the abilities of both states in order to assist the earliest stabilization and prevention of the further negative unpredictable consequences there."

Lavrov said Russia and China had the "identical position" that "every nation should determine its future independently without outside interference". Presumably, the two countries are now agreed on a common position to oppose any move by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to conduct a ground operation in Libya.

So far, the Russian position had been that Moscow wouldn't accept any UN Security Council mandate being given to NATO for a ground operation without a "clearly expressed position" approving it on the part of the Arab League and the African Union (of which Libya is a member).

Evidently, there is a "trust deficit" here, which is becoming unbridgeable by the day unless NATO decides on an immediate ceasefire in Libya. Put simply, Russia no longer trusts the United States or its NATO allies to be transparent about their intentions with regard to Libya and the Middle East. A few days ago, Lavrov spoke at length on Libya in an interview with Russian television channel Tsentr. He expressed great frustration over the West's doublespeak and subterfuges in unilaterally interpreting UN Resolution 1973 to do just about what it pleased.

Lavrov revealed in that interview, "Reports of a ground operation [in Libya] being prepared are coming in and suggest that the appropriate plans are being developed in NATO and the European Union." And he publicly hinted at Moscow's suspicion that the US ploy would be to circumvent the need to approach the Security Council for a proper mandate for NATO ground operations in Libya and to instead arm-twist United secretary general Ban Ki-Moon's secretariat to extract a "request" to the Western alliance to provide escorts to the UN's humanitarian mission and use that as a fig leaf to commence ground operations.

The public stance taken by Russia and China would pre-empt officials in Ban's secretariat from surreptitiously facilitating a NATO ground operation through the back door. Ban visited Moscow recently and Russian reports suggested that he "got an earful" about the fashion in which he headed the world body. A seasoned Moscow commentator Dmitry Kosyrev wrote with biting sarcasm:

There are many ways of politically telling a guest on one's own behalf and on behalf of one's international partners: "We are not very happy with your performance, esteemed Mr Ban." Often words are not even necessary in these cases. It's clear that the secretary general has a thing for the revolutionary romanticism of civil wars and supports freedom fighters in general. As a result, he often sides with arch-liberals from Europe or America.

However, the secretary general of the UN should not take extreme political positions, let alone side with the minority of UN member states on an issue, as he has in the case of Libya and the Ivory Coast. This is not what he was elected for. The point is not to compel Mr. Ban to change his convictions or position, but rather to adjust his vision slightly in favor of greater neutrality.

Moscow and Beijing seem to view the so-called Libya Contact Group (comprising 22 countries and six international organizations) with a high degree of suspicion. Referring to the group's decision at its meeting in Rome last Thursday to make available a temporary fund of US\$250 million immediately as assistance to the Libyan rebels, Lavrov said caustically that the group was "increasing its efforts to take on the lead role in determining the policy of the international community in relation to Libya" and warned that it should not "seek to replace the United Nations Security Council, and it should not take sides".

It has become a matter of disquiet for both Moscow and Beijing that the contact group is gradually evolving into a veritable regional process sidestepping the UN for modulating the Arab upheaval to suit Western strategies. The clutch of Gulf Cooperation Council states (and Arab League) that are present in the contact group enables the West to proclaim that the process is a collective voice of regional opinion. (Ironically, France has invited Russia to join the contact group.)

Tip of the iceberg

At the joint press conference with Yang in Moscow on Friday, Lavrov came straight to the point: "The contact group has established itself. And now it is trying to take responsibility on to itself about the policy of the international community toward Libya. And not only Libya, we're hearing voices that are calling for this group to decide what to do in other states in the region." What worries Russia in immediate terms would be that the contact group might be slouching toward Syria to effect a regime change in that country, too.

China has been very diplomatic on the Libya issue so far and has left it to Russia to bell the Western cat, but it is now becoming more and more vocal. Yang was quite forthright at the Moscow press conference in criticizing Western intervention in Libya. Hardly three weeks ago, the People's Daily commented that the war in Libya was at a stalemate; the Muammar Gaddafi regime had proved resilient; and the Libyan opposition was overrated by the West. The daily commented:

Libyan war has become a "hot potato" for the West. First, the West cannot afford the war economically and strategically ... The war is too heavy to afford for the European countries and the United States, which have not completely emerged out of the economic crisis. The longer the war, the more countries in the West will find themselves at a disadvantage.

"Second, the West will encounter many military and legal troubles ... If the West continues to get

involved, they will be considered as being partial to one side ... In regards to military actions, Western countries will have to dispatch ground forces in order to depose Gaddafi ... This is totally beyond the scope of the United Nation's authority, and is likely to repeat the mistakes of the Iraq War ... In a word, the military solution to the problem in Libya has come to an end and the political solution has been put on the agenda."

Yang's talks in Moscow signify that Beijing senses by now that the West is determined to hold the "hot potato" no matter what it takes, make it "cool down" by hook or by crook and then consume it without sharing with anyone else. Accordingly, a recalibration of the Chinese position and taking it much closer to the Russian stance (which has been far more openly critical of the Western intervention in Libya) is becoming apparent.

Moscow would have encouraged Beijing to see the writing on the wall. But the clincher seems to be their growing sense of unease that Western intervention in Libya is only the tip of the iceberg and what is unfolding could be a geostrategy aimed at the perpetuation of the West's historic dominance of the new Middle East in the post-Cold War era. Woven into it is the extremely worrying precedent of NATO acting militarily without a specific UN mandate.

Lavrov and Yang have since proceeded to Astana for a foreign ministers conference of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that will negotiate the agenda for a summit meeting of the regional body taking place in the Kazakh capital on June 15. The big question is whether the Russian-Chinese agreement on "tight cooperation" in the Middle Eastern and North African issues will become the common SCO position. The probability seems high.