International Conflict Management after Libya: the glass (still) half-full?

Professor Stefan Wolff

Two years ago, in March 2011, the UN Security Council passed **Resolution 1973 (2011) (http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1973(2011))** . The abstentions of Russia and China, in essence, enabled the launch of NATO operation Unified Protector to stop the assault of Colonel Gaddafi's forces on Benghazi in its tracks, ushering in the demise of his 40-year dictatorship. What was, on paper, intended as an operation to protect civilians, turned out, in practice, as providing rebel forces with air cover for their ground operation that resulted in regime change. Leaving aside the legal and moral arguments over whether this outcome was in the letter or spirit of UNSCR 1973 (2012) or not, it was definitely what Russia and China had signed up to. Unsurprisingly, the Security Council has not passed, as yet, any resolution on Syria.

Considering the gravity of the **humanitarian crisis (http://www.responsibilitytoprotect.org/index.php/crises/crisis-in-syria)** in Syria and the growing Western and regional **frustration (http://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2013/march/statement-on-syria/)** at the inability of the Security Council to take any meaningful action to end it, two scenarios seem possible: continuation of the already protracted civil war in the country, possibly beyond the fall of the current regime, and its spread to neighbouring countries; unilateral action by a coalition of like-minded countries (not dissimilar to the coalition that took on Gaddafi) without UN Security Council approval that leads to Assad's removal but is unlikely (similar to Libya) to spell the end to the current violent turbulence within Syria and its regional proliferation.

Neither of these scenarios sound promising from a humanitarian perspective, nor do they give great confidence for the organised international or even regional community to come to grips with the challenges of violent regime transitions. At the same time, one might argue that Syria and Libya are merely different in scale, important though that is, not in nature: with or without a UN-backed international intervention, people suffer on a grand scale and instability and insecurity spread across borders and trigger and exacerbate new and old threats.

A more optimistic view would hold that Libya and Syria may simply be outliers. Each presenting a unique set of challenges, they are not an accurate reflection of the abilities and willingness of different actors in the international community to rise, individually and collectively, to major threats to international security. Despite the impasse over Syria, cooperation among major regional and international powers is ongoing and in many cases quietly effective. In **Yemen (http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/PRST/2013/3)** , Russia fully supports, and actively participates in, the efforts to manage that country's transition peacefully, China collaborates with the EU and NATO on combating piracy off the coast of **Somalia (http://www.consilium.europa.eu/eeas/security-defence/eu-operations/eunavfor-somalia?lang=en)** , and both countries supported the adoption of new sanctions against **North Korea (http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2094(2013))** .

A realistic middle ground between these two views might be that the international community's capacity for conflict management remains a potentially highly effective, albeit not flawless, instrument for managing a wide range of security challenges. This instrument, however, will be applied selectively and in line with the national interests of the great powers—both those who block international efforts at the UN level and those who decide that some situations call for unilateral action.

Stefan Wolff (http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/government-society/staff/profiles.aspx?ReferenceId=4539) *is Professor of International Security in the Department of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Birmingham.*

Read more experts' perspectives on **Libya: two years on (/research/impact/perspective/libya-two-years-on.aspx)** .

© University of Birmingham 2014