The Arab Revolutions, or the Arab Spring as known in the West, started in December 2010 with protests in Tunisia following the suicide of Mohamed Bouaziz and quickly spread into Egypt, Libya, and Morocco, Oman, Syria, and Yemen, causing regime changes and subsequent political upheavals in several of these countries. More than 4,000 miles away, the Chinese government in Beijing was closely monitoring the developments of such widespread uprisings. Why? Because the Arab Revolutions posed a serious challenge to not only China’s Middle East policy, but also the stability of the Chinese society.

Prior to the Arab Revolutions, China had long-term stable relationships with the Arab countries. Diplomatically, China had to determine with which factions to side in order to pursue and protect China’s interests in those countries. Domestically, China was extremely wary that the revolutionary waves could advance and thus propel Xinjiang in China’s northwest region to follow suit. The panel, “China and the Arab Revolutions,” approaches China from two angles. In her paper, titled “China’s Policies on Yemen’s Civil War and Humanitarian Crisis,” I-wei Jennifer Chang will discuss China’s interests and policies on Yemen’s civil war as well its role in regional and international efforts to mitigate the ongoing conflict. China’s Yemen policy is a case study on Beijing’s approach to the Arab uprisings and draws a distinction from the Chinese approach to the Syrian conflict. Anchi Hoh’s paper, titled “The Arab Revolutions in China’s View,” will examine how the Chinese news media and academia covered and interpreted the Arab Revolutions. Analyzing a sampling of Chinese journalistic reports, news commentaries, and academic studies published from 2011 to date, this paper attempts to outline China’s view on the Arab Uprisings.
The Arab Revolutions in China’s View

Anchi Hoh, Ph.D., Acting Assistant Chief of the African and Middle Eastern Division, Library of Congress*

“Where there is oppression, there is revolt.” Although Mao Zedong’s saying was mainly to justify the role of the Chinese communists during the Chinese Civil War in the first half of the twentieth century, it largely rang true in the context of the Arab Revolutions. Following the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouaziz in Tunisia in December 2010, large-scale protests broke out in a good number of Arab countries demanding jobs and improvement of people’s lives. In several cases, these protests advocated for democracy and led to regime changes. Fast-forwarding from Mao’s period to date, it seems that China today has grown wary of the values of revolution and the political implications that the Arab Revolutions could bring. With Xinjiang on its northwest, Tibet on the southwest, Hong Kong and Taiwan on the southeast, to China the Arab Revolutions could bring dangerous consequences. In facing the potential of political challenges from the Middle East and North Africa impacting its homeland, one of China’s counterstrategies has been to increase domestic economic opportunity – one of the primary goals of president Xin Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013.

The West has examined the Arab Revolutions from a variety of perspectives - the power of social media in these events, the sectarian struggles, the roles of women and other under-represented groups, comparisons between those revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa and those in other regions, and the influences of western democratic ideologies, to name a few. Have Chinese intelligentsia used similar approaches to study these major political events? If so, how are the Arab Revolutions being reported and interpreted for the Chinese audience? To address this question, this paper studies a sampling of news reports, commentaries and academic studies published from 2011 to date in order to analyze China’s view on the Arab Revolutions.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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China’s Policies on Yemen’s Civil War and Humanitarian Crisis

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The Arab uprisings in 2011, initially dubbed the “Arab Spring,” that swept through North Africa and the Middle East created numerous challenges for the Chinese government. With longstanding ties to authoritarian governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, China initially supported these Arab regimes to remain in power and withstand Western pressure for regime change. However, as the leaders of Tunisia and Egypt were ousted in early 2011, Beijing was forced to recognize opposition leaders, with whom it previously had little contact. China made pragmatic decisions to build relations with new actors in power to preserve its diplomatic relations and economic interests in Arab countries. On the international front, Beijing worked closely with Moscow to oppose, at least nominally, Western calls for regime change and use of military force to achieve geopolitical objectives in Arab countries experiencing civil war. For Beijing, the Arab uprisings became an arena for major-power competition, particularly between Western and non-Western major powers such as Russia and China.

This paper examines a case study on Beijing’s policies on the Arab uprisings by focusing on China’s approach on Yemen’s conflict since 2011. It illustrates the commonalities in Beijing’s foreign policymaking on the Arab revolts as well as the distinctive features of Chinese policies on Yemen owing to several factors, including China’s strategic assessment of Yemen to its foreign-policy interests, major-power bargaining on the Middle East, and Beijing’s balancing act between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, on the one hand, and Iran, on the other. China desires to play a leadership role in international and regional peacebuilding efforts, and Yemen is a test case of Beijing’s actual capacity and limits to such endeavors. As Beijing has generally supported the international (including the Western and GCC) consensus on the Yemen conflict, its policies on Yemen provides a comparison to the starkly different Chinese calculations and policies on other Arab revolts such as Syria. This paper will also discuss broader trends and new developments in China’s Yemen policy over the past decade and their implications for Sino-Middle Eastern relations and China’s growing influence in the region.

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