The Syrian Crisis and the Responsibility to Protect: 
A Chinese Perspective

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Introduction
On 19 July 2012, Li Baodong, the Permanent Representative of China to the United Nations Office in Geneva stated that ‘the Syrian conflict should be resolved by Syrians themselves’. This statement represents China’s third veto against UN resolutions on Syria.

The deepening turmoil in Syria has led to calls for the international community to take action to implement the ‘responsibility to protect’ (R2P) norm in Syria. R2P is a set of principles that first obligates individual states and then the international community to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.1 However, R2P has not been implemented by the UN in Syria, partly due to the objection of China – and Russia. This was in contrast to the situation in Libya where China did not veto the Western inspired UN resolution establishing a no fly zone to protect civilians in Benghazi under threat of annihilation from Muammar Gaddafi’s forces.

China’s reaction to the Syrian crisis highlights how international norms are now interpreted by China and sheds light on the rationale underpinning China’s foreign policy behaviour.

China’s response to the Syrian uprising
China was prepared to accept the 2011 UNSC resolution on Libya as it had few direct interests in the country and wished to be seen as a responsible major power. But many in China were alarmed as the Western powers extended the UN mandate to oust Mr Gaddafi.

Throughout the Syrian crisis, China has not accepted any type of foreign intervention in Syria. Instead, it firmly calls for a peaceful resolution of the crisis through political dialogue and has repeatedly exercised its veto against UN resolutions on Syria.

The first Chinese veto was exercised in October 2011 to oppose the UN resolution drafted by Britain and France to condemn crimes in Syria. On 4 February 2012, China again vetoed a resolution supporting a peace plan that called for the Syrian President to step down. China’s third veto opposed the UN resolution on economic sanctions against the Syrian government. China reaffirmed in May 2013 that pushing forward the vote on a resolution in the UN General Assembly would not help the situation.

According to the Chinese government ‘a political settlement is the sole viable way of defusing the crisis in Syria’.

However, China recently proposed the idea of ‘responsible protection’. The idea suggests that the UN Security Council is the only legitimate actor to exercise humanitarian intervention and that there is a need to establish supervising mechanisms to ensure the means, process and scope of ‘protection’ in Syria. According to one senior Chinese official, the idea of ‘responsible protection’ is the Chinese way of contributing to building of a just and reasonable new international political order.

**Chinese interpretation of the ‘responsibility to protect’**
The ‘responsibility to protect’ (R2P) norm was adopted at the UN World Summit meeting in 2005 and has been addressed in various UN resolutions and statements since then. In essence, R2P, through upholding a state’s responsibility to prevent, to react, and to rebuild, offers a method to protect people from four major crimes: genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The R2P norm constitutes three ‘pillars’: first, a state has a responsibility to protect its population from mass atrocities; second, the international community has a responsibility to assist the state to fulfill its primary responsibility; and third, if a state fails to protect its citizens from mass atrocities and peaceful measures have failed, the international community has the responsibility to intervene through coercive measures such as economic sanctions. Military intervention can be undertaken as a last resort.

China endorsed the R2P norm at the UN World Summit in 2005 and acknowledges the UN’s moral obligation to address humanitarian crises. In interpreting the R2P concept, China stresses the importance of the responsibility to prevent, react and rebuild. China’s interpretation of R2P has emphasised the need to ensure that necessary conditions for intervention which are encapsulated in the R2P concept have to be met in order to consider intervention in sovereign states. In the international community, there has been intense debate regarding the conditions that permit its application and its manner of implementation. It is not clear how and who should implement the three core components of R2P. From a Chinese perspective, the notion R2P could possibly undermine sovereignty. The Chinese maintain that the responsibility to rebuild, which has been given least attention by the international community, could only serve to undermine both prevention and reaction. China believes that a weakening of any one of the three responsibilities of

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2 Statement given by Assistant Foreign Minister Le Yucheng at a forum held by China Institute of International Studies in April 2012.
R2P to prevent, react and rebuild could substantially weaken the concept as a whole and therefore the potential to end mass atrocities.

Chinese analysts perceive R2P as a bridge between ‘those who claim a right to intervene coercively to protect populations’ and ‘others who continue to place great normative and political purchase in sovereignty and non-intervention’. China also contends that the best way to protect civilians is to ‘provide them with safe and predictable living environments by actively exploring ways of preventing conflicts and effectively resolving ongoing conflicts’. China’s foreign policy elites supports the R2P concept. They highlight the need for integrated strategies within the international community. The then Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi remarked: ‘it is necessary to make comprehensive efforts at the national, regional and global levels to achieve peace’.

In the case of Syria, the reasons for China’s persistent caution against using force and applying sanctions, have been explained by China that the necessary conditions for implementing R2P have not been met and measures have not received full support from relevant regional organizations. For example, the member states of the Arab League have not reached consensus: Iran supports the Assad regime; the Gulf countries are divided in their support for the Syrian government; Iraq, Lebanon and Algeria hope to see a regime change in Syria; Egypt and other countries in the region take a more neutral stance.

China’s reluctance to use force in resolving the Syrian crisis is also linked with its ‘global peace engagement strategy’, which clearly states China’s commitment to UN peacekeeping operations and international peace-building operations. As of June 2013, China contributed 1,782 military and police personnel to UN operations, ranking 16th out of contributing countries. Among the 5 permanent members of the UN Security Council, China contributes the highest number of UN peacekeepers. As stated in the strategy, the Chinese means to achieve and maintain peace differs from the general Western norms. China emphasizes sovereignty over humanitarian intervention; China prioritizes economic development over democratization; and China believes in top-down state building.

**Chinese strategic culture and the ‘responsibility to protect’**

China’s interpretation of R2P is influenced by China’s long history and strategic

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culture. China’s reluctance to use force is rooted in Chinese strategic culture. The non-intervention principle in contemporary Chinese diplomatic discourse derives from the Chinese traditional understanding of the use of force conceptualized by the oldest Chinese strategic writer Sun Zi. Sun Zi’s insights especially articulated in the military treatise *The Art of War*, which was written during the historical period characterized by the widespread use of military force in ancient China, have shaped the Chinese way of using force. These principles are still relevant today.

Sun Zi’s understanding of the character of war differs from the Aristotelian instrumental thinking of war as a necessary instrument for obtaining a specific political end. War *à la* Sun Zi is also different from the Weberian interpretation of war as an Ideal Type, a reservation of the monopoly of violence. Sun Zi sees war as a necessary evil, because it destroys the ‘cosmic harmony’ of the universe. Sun Zi claims that ‘weapons are instruments of ill omen’, war should only be waged for the right reason, since ‘engaging in a battle without righteousness, no one under Heaven would be able to be solid and strong’. War being a necessary evil relates to Sun Zi’s understanding of strategy. The best strategy, according to Sun Zi, is not fighting but ‘conquering without ever engaging the enemy or inflicting any bloodshed’. This is Sun Zi’s advice on the viability and legitimacy of the use of force in the international society.

Chinese strategic culture also refers to a Chinese way of using force. Sima Rangju, a Chinese General (living in the ‘Spring and Autumn Period’ (B.C. 770-B.C. 476)) states that ‘warfare is necessary to the existence of the state, it provides the principle means for punishing the evil and rescuing the oppressed, and its conscientious exploitation is the foundation for political power’. In other words, military means can be considered and accepted to pursue justice and legitimate goals. It is necessary to demonstrate how and when war is just or unjust, which depends largely on different values and philosophy. Hence, this leads to the policy choices and challenges for China to implement R2P in a just and legitimate way.

Chinese military leaders believe that ancient Chinese values and principles remain relevant today. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has published a book exploring Chinese strategic culture and its relevance to China’s military modernization. According to a senior official of the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences, ‘strategic thinking flows into the mainstream of a country or nation’s strategic culture. Each country or nation’s strategic culture cannot but bear the imprint of cultural traditions, which prescribes and defines strategy-making’. China’s 2013 national defense White Paper stated that the duty of the PLA is to build up its military capacity and

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develop its military strength to prevail in any conflict. Chinese President Xi has been making some bellicose speeches to the PLA stressing the need to be prepared to fight and win ‘bloody wars.’

Policy Implications
China’s attitude towards the development in Syria, and in the Middle East at large, highlights China’s growing influence in world politics and its role in shaping critical global norms. China’s stance on the Syrian crisis and its interpretation of R2P are underpinned by China’s historic strategic culture.

China supports Brazil’s concept of ‘responsibility while protecting’, which is a new set of principles introduced in a concept note by Brazilian UN Ambassador Maria Luiza Ribeiro Viotti to the UN Security Council in November 2011. The new concept aims to supplement R2P by proposing a set of criteria to be taken into account before the Security Council mandates any use of military force, and to ensure proper monitoring of the implementation of military action. China acknowledges that the best interventionist policy is when the use of force is subject to supervision and evaluation, and has called for more countries to contribute to rectifying the R2P shortcomings.

The debate on R2P through the Syrian crisis calls China to acknowledge the core values of ‘human security’, ‘sovereignty as responsibility’, and the empowerment of regional organizations. The difficulty to implement R2P in Syria indicates that realpolitik often prevail over abstract norms in international politics. The challenge is to find a practical solution- a just implementation of the R2P.