

Russia on the military intervention in Libya

Marcin Kaczmarek

On 17 March, Russia abstained from voting on the UN Security Council resolution sanctioning the use of force against Libya, which allowed the motion to pass. Nevertheless, most Russian politicians have been critical of the military action which Western states launched two days later. On this occasion, a public dispute arose between President Dmitri Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on both the UN resolution and their evaluation of the Western military intervention.

By accepting the resolution, Russia has behaved in an unusual way; usually Moscow sticks close to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. Russia's position was influenced primarily by the attitude of the Arab countries, which had demanded action from the UNSC, as well as Moscow's strategic relations with France, which favoured intervention. Russia's next moves are not readily predictable, primarily owing to the differences of opinion between the Prime Minister and the President.

Russia on UN Resolution 1973

Resolution 1973 adopted by the UNSC authorises member states to use all necessary measures to protect civilians in Libya, except any kind of occupation of Libyan territory. At the same time it establishes a no-fly zone, which also permits all necessary measures to enforce its observance. In practice, this means the Security Council's consent to the use of military force against Libya (with the exception of a land invasion).

Although Russia did not veto the resolution, its representative at the UN Vitaly Churkin criticised its content. He justified his country's abstention by the perceived need to protect the civilian population, as well as the fact that the Arab League had requested the UNSC for the establishment of the no-fly zone. At the same time, Ambassador Churkin stated that the resolution departed from the Arab League's proposal and allowed for wide-ranging military intervention. He also criticised the lack of response to Russian concerns (including how the resolution would be implemented) from those states which supported the resolution.

Contradictions in evaluating the military intervention in Libya

The military intervention launched on 19 March by the US, France and Great Britain brought about a harsher tone in comments by representatives of the Russian government. On 20 March, the Russian Foreign Ministry stated that the use of armed forces went beyond the framework of the adopted resolution, and the chairmen of the Duma committee for

international affairs (Konstantin Kosachov) and of the Federation Council (Leonid Slutsky) also criticised it. Over the next few days the Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov commented in a similar vein while visiting Egypt, referring negatively both to the use of force and the resolution itself, saying that it strayed from the Arab League's proposal.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin adopted the severest position; on March 21 he stated that he considered the adopted resolution to be "deficient", and that it permitted interference in the internal affairs of other states, resembling "a mediaeval summons to a crusade." Putin also harshly criticised the USA's policy, primarily the readiness with which it resorts to force, and emphasised its habit of doing so. A few hours later, in a special declaration, President Medvedev replied to this criticism; he expressed his support for Resolution 1973, stressing that abstaining from the veto was his personal instruction. Nor did he explicitly condemn the manner of the armed intervention, although he regretted that civilian losses had not been avoided. At the same time, he deemed Putin's tone unacceptable. The State Duma, which adopted a special statement on Libya on 23 March, tried to reconcile the two positions. On one hand, it considered Russia's refusal to veto the resolution appropriate; yet on the other, it called for combat to cease as soon as possible, and concluded that some countries had used the resolution for "other purposes".

Motives for Russia's behaviour

Russia's acquiescence to the Western states' use of force is surprising, bearing in mind Russia's previous practice at the Security Council forum; Russia has usually adhered strictly to the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs, opposed the use of force, and in practice prolonged the process of adopting any resolutions which provide for sanctions or intervention. At the same time, Russia's ambiguous evaluation of the UN resolution, and the difference of opinions between President and Prime Minister, suggest that there are serious differences within the Russian leadership on how Moscow should respond to the Libyan crisis. It cannot be ruled out that the decision to abstain from vetoing the resolution was made in some haste; consultations in the decision-making circles may have been limited in nature, and so President Medvedev took the final decision.

North Africa is of secondary importance in Russian foreign policy, and Russia's interests in the region are limited to the areas of energy and arms exports. Since the beginning of the Arab revolutions Moscow has adopted a passive position, not becoming involved in solving the growing crisis, but not torpedoing the Western states' efforts either. For this reason, it may be concluded that the particular situation with Libya has inclined Russia to consent to Resolution 1973. Firstly, the position of the Arab states was of considerable importance for Moscow, as they had asked for the establishment of the no-fly zone. Russia, mindful of its image in the Arab world and its good relations with individual countries, considered the Arab League's position to be valid. It thus seems that Moscow believes Muammar Gaddafi has limited prospects of retaining power in Libya in the medium term. Secondly, the European context was equally important from Moscow's standpoint. By enabling the adoption of the resolution, Russia gave very clear political support to France, which was the driving force for the intervention. This position will certainly contribute to the further strengthening of Russian-French relations. In addition, Moscow voted in exactly the same way as did Germany. Thirdly, Russia's adoption of a neutral position was also easier because China,

India and Brazil also abstained; as a result, the entire BRIC group backed off from taking any responsibility for the action, and placed the burden of the intervention's results back onto the Western countries.

Forecasting Russia's next steps

Forecasting Russia's next moves in relation to the crisis is made more difficult by the clash between the Prime Minister and the President. The foreign policy differences between Medvedev and Putin had hitherto been limited in nature and related to matters of tactics, such as the conditions for Russia's membership in the WTO or how to negotiate the new START treaty with the US. However, in the case of Libya, their differences are fundamental in nature, and have now been made public.

President Medvedev has stressed that Russia does not intend to participate in aerial activities over Libya, or send troops there if land-based operations begin. These declarations suggest that such a scenario cannot be ruled out, although it is not clear how Moscow would react to such a situation. Most of the Russian political elite, led by Prime Minister Putin, are categorically opposed to a land assault on Libya by Western forces, and it thus seems more likely that Russia would block any such move at the UN Security Council.

At the same time, President Medvedev has suggested the possibility of Russian mediation to find a political resolution to the crisis in Libya, indicating Moscow's good relations with the Arab states, and also that it is maintaining diplomatic contacts with Gaddafi's regime.