

China's position on international intervention: A media and journalism critical discourse analysis of its case for "Sovereignty" versus "Responsibility to Protect" principles in Syria

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Abstract

Chemical weapons use was a red-line that Damascus-directed forces crossed in the current and ongoing Syrian civil conflict. Russia and the United States disagreed not only about whether the weapons had indeed been used, but also regarding whom to identify as the weapons use perpetrators. That the United States and Russia would find themselves diametrically opposed initially on policy and military prescriptions regarding Syria is generally and theoretically explained by those countries' long-standing material and security interests in the region. Even a couple of years prior to this red-line moment—and as the early brewing civil conflict in Syria was raising the concerns of the international community—what action should be taken in Syria was the subject of considerable and heated public debate as well as name-calling between Russia and the United States at the United Nations. While the United States and Russia staked-out opposing positions on Syria on the basis of either material or national security reasoning, the Chinese interest in the dispute outcome was—and remains—less obvious or easily understood. In a previous United Nations-sanctioned action enabling intervention on Libya to oust Muammar Gaddafi, China did not veto the Security Council action ... despite its significant material interests in that country. A short while later, at the outset of the Syrian stirrings and talk of United Nations action, China made clear that it would not enable a Security Council approach that could lead to intervention, either unilaterally by a third country or via a military coalition of state actors. This work uses a media critical discourse analysis approach to understand the official Chinese position in the case

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of Syria—a position that stands in contrast to its recent and prior intervention-tolerant foreign policy position on Libya at the end of the Gaddafi-era. One conclusion of this study is that China is still formulating its dynamic and seemingly disjointed foreign policy position in the Middle East at present, and that the promotion of the principles of Sovereignty over Responsibility to Protect is the current trump card in its now dominant anti-interventionist foreign policy posture.

Keywords

Communication research methods, content analysis, discourse analysis, globalization, international and intercultural communication, mass (media) communication, ownership, policy, policy and law, political communication, publishing/print journalism

Introduction

As the summer of 2013 rolled in and the United States and Russia tried to convene a Syrian peace conference in Geneva, questions teemed about how such a conflict in that Middle Eastern country could still be in full-force. The various aspects of the conflict have drawn international attention to the global players who are involved in either bolstering or undermining the current Syrian government; bolstering or undermining the rebel forces. The United States and Russia are seen as the main international players. But in the ongoing Syrian crisis, China, too, has caused quite an uproar when, along with Russia, it vetoed North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military intervention at Security Council votes on the matter.

Politicians on opposing sides engaged in heated exchanges, with then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton lambasting the veto as a “travesty” (BBC News, 2012b), and China calling the United States reaction “super arrogant” (BBC News, 2012a). Yet, it was not only politicians who disagreed on the issue: analysts and commentators were similarly divided, though with different motivation.

While some had predicted the veto, many were taken by surprise. Analysts also differed in their interpretation of the vetoes. While the Russian veto was generally explained with the country’s material interests in, and long-held relations with, the Assad-regime (e.g. Grammaticus, 2012), China offered no such backstory. Barely a year after China (and Russia) abstained in a similar United Nations Security Council (UNSC) vote on Libya, many interpreted the Syrian veto as the Asian superpower’s attempt to take up a more active and forceful role in international conflicts, or to “assert [its] own views on the world stage” (Wee & Buckley, 2012). At the same time, others viewed it as a return to China’s traditional non-interventionist foreign policy (Piekos, 2012), with the abstention at the Libyan vote being an exceptional case. The answer was neither self-evident nor clear.

While acknowledging that the different explanations given are not mutually exclusive, the fact that expert opinion is so divided—and not necessarily along party and national lines—does raise the important question about China’s potential role in international politics. While one can only speculate about the future, reviewing how the vetoes were presented in the Chinese media can reveal what China thinks its role might be.

Media worldwide construct a discursive narrative for both their national and international audiences. With regard to the ongoing Syrian crisis, much of that narrative of the last two years focuses on the humanitarian concerns and suffering of the Syrian population. Newspapers are an important part of the wider global media ecology, and they construct and promote policy preferences through their editorial choices and textual rendering of the Syrian crisis, both directly in their opinion pieces and indirectly in their more fact-based reported pieces.

Those policy preferences may or may not align with the policy preferences of the state in which the media organ is published or produced, though media discourse is understood to have an effect on national policies and in international bodies (Robinson, 2001). This study will look at this discourse and its construction by examining opinion pieces of popular English-language publications in China and in the United States to see how the Chinese vetoes were presented. The question this article is looking to answer is, given the historical background and the Libyan events, how does China want to view itself? Do the Chinese media frame the veto as China becoming an active mediator in conflict areas or is the veto taken to be a sign of its return to a previously assumed *laissez-faire* tradition? And how does it compare to how the United States views China's role in the world?

It is obvious that a newspaper's discourse cannot be taken as a direct stand-in for "the Chinese voice" (and even less for the "American voice"). However, taking into account that Chinese customs posit that the role of the media is to be the "mouthpiece of the government" (Moore, 2011), analyzing the discourse of an official Chinese newspaper can, at the very least, shed light on how the government aims to present the Chinese position. Thus, while one should not come up with overarching claims about the motives behind the Chinese vetoes, the analysis will reveal how the Chinese government wants the world to see these motives. Contrasting this picture to the one drawn by the American media might reveal a fundamentally different interpretation of China's role in international politics. Choosing media from one of the permanent member countries of the UN Security Council was important for contrasting UN positions; using the English-language media of those countries was a limiting factor.

Theoretical framework

Scholars have long utilized comparative analyses of media discourse on particular events in various international newspapers in order to gain insight into the different perspectives and hidden or explicit ideologies of particular countries (e.g. Ali, 2011; Chan, 2012; Papacharissi & Oliveira, 2008). With China's rise to superpower status, Chinese media products have come into the spotlight, inspiring studies that contrast Chinese media coverage of events, particularly of various crises and conflicts, to that of the American media (e.g. Chang, Wang, & Chen, 1998; Ismail & Berkowitz, 2009; Li, 2009; Yang, 2003; Yin, 2007). While not comparative, a study of particular relevance for this article is Zhang's (2012) analysis of *People's Daily* editorials on the 2008 Beijing Olympics, in which the author explored how China perceives its own rise in power, concluding that the analysis revealed a China "eager to assure the world that [it] is ready to embrace and join the community of the nations, ... assume great responsibilities as a great nation, and make its own due contributions, with an open and broader mind" (Zhang, 2012, p. 19).

There is a host of methods applied by scholars when analyzing media texts; this article relies on critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA, as championed by van Dijk (1985), is a multidisciplinary method, which, primarily focusing on the reproduction of dominance and power through discourse, gives equal attention to the text and the context of the discourse analyzed. CDA explores the various levels and dimensions of the discourse, "unmasking the ideological motivations underlying the linguistic choices and discourse features" (H. Wang, 2009, p. 180). van Dijk's "ideological square"—utilized in this study—was also productively used by Michael Chan (2012). Chan analyzed reporting on an incident involving China and Japan to see how national identity and intergroup/intragroup relations are discursively constructed in newspaper editorials.

Of particular interest in shaping the analysis is van Dijk's focus on moving much of the media analysis surrounding issues of policy from a dominant academic tradition focused on content

analysis to one recognizing and embracing discourse analysis. Using van Dijk's critical approach, a qualitative study of discourse is presented.

van Dijk's work was also made use of by Fang (2001), who studied the headlines, topics, themes, and microstructures of the *China Daily* and the Taiwanese *Central Daily News* in order to detect the strategies used to guide the readers "in the construction of semantic representations and models in memory" (van Dijk, 1989, p. 116, qtd. in Fang, 2001, p. 589). Her systematic analysis points to the importance of exploring various levels of the text, from lexical choices to the global structures of the discourse, as well as the larger context in which they are produced.

This article is also influenced by Li's (2009) study on the cross-cultural differences between the relationships of individuals and their national identities in the social media space. Li follows Fairclough in her approach of CDA, viewing discourses as "ways of representing aspects of the world," with "different discourses [being] different perspectives on the world ... associated with the different relations people have to the world" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 124; qtd. in Li, 2009, p. 92).

Finally, the coding approach to the qualitative data and the interpretive direction taken was guided by the logic outlined in the second chapter of Coffey and Atkinson (1996). The explanatory principles for coding accompany the data analysis in the following sections.

Context: the Syrian crisis and UNSC measures

In the winter and spring of 2012, non-violent civilian protests in Syria were met with severe and violent responses by the state and its military. The violence escalated and was met by peaceful civilian resistance, at first, and then by low-grade, small weapons (no armored vehicles, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), or air capabilities) armed resistance both against the military and the regime of President Bashir al-Assad.

Syria, long an ally of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and—after the end of the Soviet Union—of Russia, was experiencing much of the same street protest activity (albeit not in the capital, Damascus) that previously had toppled the Qaddafi regime in Libya and the Mubarak government in Egypt—all of them part of a generically labeled "Arab Spring" movement of popular uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East. These movements had found a symbol in a Tunisian fruit vendor who martyred himself by self-immolation and whose act had been captured and diffused widely in the region.

Following these developments, there was a move in the United Nations not only to condemn the use of violence against Syrian civilians, but also to invoke the "Responsibility to Protect" principle, or R2P, as it is known in Western policy circles—an act invoked in the Libyan crisis which was not vetoed in the UN Security Council and was implemented, following France's lead, with collaboration of NATO arms, personnel, and coordination.

In the case of Syria, which remains in conflict to this date, the Security Council in 2012 twice went to a vote in an attempt to acknowledge the conditions allowing for the invocation of R2P and the consequent right to "use all necessary means" in order to address the humanitarian concerns in that conflict, including the violence against civilian populations by the state political leadership and military forces.

Of the five permanent members in the UN Security Council—who can individually veto any UN Resolution brought before them—two of them, China, along with Russia, voted both times against the invocation of R2P. China and Russia vetoed the UN Resolution on both 4 February 2012 and 19 July 2012. The United States, along with France and Britain, voted in favor of it and its invocation of R2P.¹

The veto power invoked repeatedly by China and Russia in the Syrian conflict is used very infrequently, with abstention being the preferred means of expressing disagreement over a UNSC measure. In the years between 2000 and 2012, China abstained 16 times (in altogether 2% of the total votes), while it used its veto to block UNSC action only 4 times (0.5% of the votes) (Ferdinand, 2013, p. 31).

The disagreement in the Syrian case revolved around the opposing principles of R2P and the concept of Sovereignty, both of which have a long-constructed history. The concept of Sovereignty is an old and established one predating the nation-state, but becoming constitutive of the very concept of nation-state. International order is based on this mutually constituted concept and respect for the parameters of sovereignty during war and in peace, has withstood the test of time. Legal state sovereignty's roots are directly traceable to the Peace of Westphalia of 1648.

R2P, or, rather, the right of intervention and infringement on national sovereignty and interest, also has its legal roots in the 17th century and can claim its pedigree in the three books by the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius, *De jure belli ac pacis libri tres* (1751), a work that heralded the concept of a "just war." This idea has evolved over time and—through the many wars and interventions based on a "just war" principle—into our modern era. It has permutated in the humanitarian realm under the rubric and international legal norm of R2P. R2P specifically, however, is a relatively newly articulated policy concept, established via policy adoption at the United Nations in 2001, though it has its precursors in historic actions (and inactions) by nation-states that have used humanitarian crises as the justification for overriding—or discarding outright—sovereign rights in the last three decades (Evans & Sahnoun, 2002).

Its recent evolution can be traced through the conflicts and crises that were no longer seemingly as remote as the seas of a distant shore, but were brought to our living rooms and breakfast tables via a graphically evolved and more sophisticated media than anyone at the time of Grotius could have imagined. Western newspapers used their opinion pages and their editorial imagery to express outrage at the inaction of states to intervene in bloody massacres, and the western discourse of the time was sometimes in direct conflict with the policy preferences of their states. In Bosnia and Rwanda during the time of the George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations, the American media were harsh critics of both administrations' inaction in the face of what has in retrospect been broadly accepted and classified as "genocide" or "ethnic cleansing."

The newspaper and television coverage of the Rwandan genocide—and the international community's inaction during the most intensive and concentrated mass murder in history—raised the stakes for both world citizenry and media organizations as the question of "what can be done?" came to dominate the western humanitarian discourse.

Rwanda's remote and non-strategic location made foreign states' indifference feasible, but the molding of an international humanitarian intervention principle that would trump the concept of sovereignty was starting to develop as a result. The contravening narrative by popular media both exerted political pressure and may have had an effect in the eventual international intervention in Bosnia (Wood & Peake, 1998). As a result of the conceptual refinement of R2P over the last few years and following not only the Rwandan and Bosnian events, but also on the heels of Somalia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, and, most recently, Libya, a protocol and policy naturalization, with its own value constructions, has evolved.

Methodology

This study looks at newspaper opinion pieces from the English-language *China Daily* and compares them to the opinion pieces of *The Washington Post* during a short period when both China and the United States were advocating opposing policy actions publicly and at the United Nations in 2012.

The two newspapers analyzed in this article were selected for their importance and their focus on international news reporting (although convenience and availability undeniably also played a role in sampling). *China Daily* is the highest-circulation English-language Chinese newspaper, and the only national English-language broadsheet in China (Messner & Garrison, 2006). Produced in the same building, it is the English-language “sister paper” of the top Chinese newspaper the *People’s Daily* (Chen, 2012, p. 309). Its digital edition, which was used for this study, was launched in 1995 and now boasts over 31 million daily page views (<http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cd/introduction.html>). In addition to its sheer size, *China Daily* is important as arguably the official voice of China; its “editorials ... function as an important means of conveying the government’s opinions and attitudes to the rest of the world” (Lihua, 2009, p. 60). Its official status is shown by the fact that its 30th birthday celebration in 2011 was attended by several leading party functionaries (Xing, 2011).

The Washington Post is one of the most influential American newspapers, described—along with the *The New York Times*—as having “large foreign news staffs, high prestige and sophistication, and a record of willingness to take on the government” (Entman, 2004/2009, p. 77). This, along with its readership profile—educated, middle-class, professional (Byng, 2010, p. 113)—entails that it is often analyzed by media scholars. Its influence and high-quality of foreign reporting (Gruley & Duvall, 2012, p. 31) are also reasons why this is of particular interest for this study.

Both *The Washington Post* and the *China Daily* dealt extensively with the Syrian crisis in their news section as well as in opinion pieces. In order to limit the scope of the research, news articles were not included in this analysis. The importance of editorials on public discourse, and analytically, for the exploration of a newspaper’s ideologies, can hardly be overstated (Lee & Lin, 2006; Zhang, 2012). van Dijk (1996) attributes editorials and op-eds a “prominent function ... in the expression and construction of public opinion.” Their influence is, arguably, particularly great on the “less familiar, yet more complex area of foreign policy because such coverage influences how the public and policy makers perceive other peoples and regions of the world” (Izadi & Saghayebiria, 2007, p. 141; see also Le, 2003). They are, therefore, especially suitable for this study of the discourse on Syria. Analytically, since editorials are “mass communicated types of opinion discourse par excellence” (van Dijk, 1996), they are the sections of the newspaper where its ideologies and dominant discourses can best be studied (Chan, 2012, p. 367).

The Washington Post, following the Western tradition of separating news from opinion pieces offered a fairly clear-cut selection of editorials. The *China Daily* presented a more complicated case. As W. Wang (2008) explains, in addition to news items and opinion pieces, Chinese newspapers often feature a hybrid type of article: “comprehensive news recasts (*xinwen zongshu*) in China usually include explicit opinion elements that cannot be found in ‘hard’ news reports” (p. 362). Some of these hybrid articles were included in the corpus to be analyzed.

Overview of data body

The research was conducted by reverting to a newspaper website text-based search for “Syria,” “China,” and “veto”²² with the search dates of the research limited to the period from prior to the first 2012 UN Security Council vote to the aftermath of the second vote: from 1 February 2012 to 31 July 2012.

The total number of opinion pieces reviewed amounted to the following:

The *China Daily*. 10 self-identified opinion pieces or editorials, including 4 cartoons and 3 articles not identified as Opinion but containing strong subjective elements, falling under the category of “comprehensive news recast,” discussed above. For the sake of comparability, the cartoons were excluded from the analysis, leaving us with a total of 10 articles.

The Washington Post. A total of 9 editorials and op-eds.

As discussed above, coding for the category of opinion pieces required deciding on articles that were not listed as opinion pieces in the *China Daily*, but which carried opinion-oriented headlines or content that was minimally reported and which mostly reflected a strong opinion or editorial position supported mainly by author argument. Thus, it was necessary to dig into news articles themselves, too, to decide whether to place them as opinion pieces or not. Of the 13 total *China Daily* pieces coded as opinion pieces, 10 were self-identified as such by the newspaper. Pieces that were not self-identified but were strongly worded or lightly reported and included headlines such as “Security council discussion crucial for Syria” were coded as Opinion. Factual news articles were not included in the analysis.

The articles in the news section of *The Washington Post* were reviewed to see if the coding on the articles should also be changed to Opinion, but *The Washington Post* articles adhered to the stricter convention of heavily reported pieces in the news “well” of the newspaper and, thus, not being recoded as opinion for this data set.

The opinion pieces in the two newspapers share certain characteristics. They are generally of the same length, around 400–700 words on average, and most refer to the UN vote (either upcoming or just taken). Both newspapers follow the international convention in their self-identified opinion pieces of attaching a byline to pieces written as non-staff opinion, and no byline if they are staff editorials.³ (Two of the three “comprehensive news recasts” were bylined as *Xinhua*, the Chinese state news agency, while the fourth carried the name of a *China Daily* journalist, Zhao Shengnan).

The opinion pieces that are bylined in *China Daily* are mostly from Chinese academics that work at Chinese think tanks, though there is one piece penned by a Russian foreign policy academic. Most of the American pieces are also written by a foreign policy professional, but with some of the contributors coming from farther afield than the American academy. The importance of who the authors are can hardly be overstated. As the media can give voice to certain groups, they just as easily silence others. The contrast here is clear: *China Daily*’s only non-Chinese guest writer is director of the Carnegie Moscow Center Dmitri Trenin, coming from a think tank in the only other country that vetoed the resolutions; *The Washington Post*, on the other hand, ran pieces by an exiled Syrian and an exiled Chinese dissident, both of whom, unsurprisingly, attacked China for vetoing UN intervention.

Analysis

Of the many ways in which newspapers set their interpretative frameworks, headlines are the most prominent and succinct to construct the mental frames of a particular event. As van Dijk (1988) elaborately describes, headlines are crucial for text comprehension: They “provide the semantic framework in which local (or ambiguous) details are interpreted” (van Dijk, 1988, p. 227). Let us then, first, consider the headlines used by the *China Daily* and *The Washington Post* to frame the Syrian vetoes (Table 1).

Table 1. Selected Headlines for analyzed Opinion articles from both the *China Daily* and *The Washington Post*.

Headline	Date
<i>China Daily</i>	
Security council discussion crucial for Syria	02 February 2012
Veto of UN draft aims at political solution	05 February 2012
Avoiding civil war in Syria	06 February 2012
Why another UN draft resolution on Syria vetoed	06 February 2012
High expectations of UN	18 July 2012
International diplomacy's 11th hour	18 July 2012
Hope remains for negotiated end to unrest in Syria	21 July 2012
Mission possible in Syria	24 July 2012
Tragic lesson from Iraq	25 July 2012
Right to decide own future	26 July 2012
<i>The Washington Post</i>	
As Syria violence continues, world leaders do little	06 February 2012
China is serious about its direction. Why aren't we about ours?	15 February 2012
The myth of China as a harmless tiger	15 February 2012
Syrian intervention risks upsetting global order	02 June 2012
Syrian intervention is justifiable, and just	09 June 2012
The breaking point in Syria	14 July 2012
What the U.S. should do to help Syria	14 July 2012
What was Obama waiting for in Syria?	19 July 2012
As Syria conflict rages, China hews to "non-interference" principle	21 July 2012

Even a cursory glance at the headlines of the two newspapers reveals a fundamental difference of interpretative frameworks with regard to the Syrian veto. The *China Daily* continues to emphasize the importance of “diplomacy,” “discussion,” and the role of the UN in dealing with the crisis; *The Washington Post*, with the exception of a single article by Henry A. Kissinger—though it is an important one, see below—calls attention to the ongoing violence and demands intervention. The lexical choices are revealing: while the Chinese newspaper explains the “veto,” the American paper claims that “world leaders do little,” and that Syria is at a “breaking point.” When referring to the conflict, *China Daily* uses broader macro terms such as “civil war” and “unrest,” while *The Washington Post* prefers “violence” and the expression that the “conflict rages.” Moreover, “civil war,” as opposed to the raging violence against the population is by definition an internal affair of a country.⁴ The interpretative framework, or mental frame, given by the two papers, thus, differs considerably; the Chinese version emphasizes that a peaceful solution is needed (and possible), while the American paper, in all but one piece, calls for military intervention. This predicts the two contrasting principles of Sovereignty versus R2P at work here.⁵

As for the research question, China's potential role is not explicitly discussed in the *China Daily* headlines; the calls for a peaceful solution, one for which “discussions” and “negotiations” are needed implicitly suggest that China might be an active participant in the process, a peacemaker. The headline “Mission possible for Syria” also entails active participation (a mission) rather than an isolationist standpoint.

The Washington Post headlines are more overt in discussing China's role in world politics. While the phrases "world leaders do little" and "China hews to 'non-interference' principle" might suggest a view of the country as passive and introverted, the headlines "China is serious about its direction. Why aren't we about ours?" and "The myth of China as a harmless tiger" all the more forcefully put forward an image of China as a confident actor—for better or worse.⁶

Having looked at the headlines, let us now explore the global thematic structures of the articles. As expected, the two newspapers reveal vast differences in the thematic focus of their discourses. While *The Washington Post* puts the Syrian crisis into a global context,⁷ emphasizing the potential regional consequences of (non)-intervention, the *China Daily*, other than referencing the Libyan case, mostly restricts its view to Syria. The Chinese editors and guest authors in the sample keep repeating their "not another forced regime change" mantra without explicitly explaining its wider consequences, while *The Washington Post* authors seem eager to spell out that forcing Assad to step down would deprive Iran of a key ally, and Syria's democratic turn might help neighboring Lebanon and Iraq along on their road to democracy as well (14 July 2012b). It is, perhaps, not a coincidence that the only piece providing an international contextualization to the crisis in *China Daily* was written by their only foreign contributor in the sample: Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center (18 July 2012b). The difference is also detectable in the actors mentioned by the two newspapers. While the *China Daily* mostly names (officials from) UNSC member countries, Syria and Libya, *The Washington Post's* net is cast wider, in space (Iraq, Iran, Israel, etc.) as well as in time (comparing China to the former Soviet Union, 15 February 2012). Although the case should not be overstated, the data do seem to suggest a less globally oriented, more inward-looking China.

It is also interesting to note how differently the two newspapers evaluate the only example consistently brought up in *China Daily*: the Libyan events. For the Chinese editors, it unquestionably represents the worst possible outcome of a crisis: Libyan people now live in the danger of "a sectarian civil war" (06 February 2012a). In contrast, some American authors allege that in Libya, "most things [are] functioning normally" (09 June 2012) and in fact, the military intervention leading to the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi "put an end to a disastrous conflict" (14 July 2012b).

A further factor unmasked by the analysis of the thematic structures is the relationship between the two countries that vetoed the resolutions, Russia and China. Interestingly, not only *The Washington Post* but also the *China Daily* seems to credit Russia with the leading role in the vetoes.⁸ In the *Post's* case, this can probably be explained by the fact that the Russian interests and involvement in Syria are clear and thus, easier to use in an argument than the much more vague and possibly hollow-sounding "we're standing up for a principle"-claim by China. It is much more surprising that in some of the *China Daily* pieces, China is also depicted passively, with much space devoted to the Russian efforts of making peace in Syria.

The difference between the two newspapers in approaches to foreign policy is clear from the data. *The Washington Post* pieces are all too happy to discuss what the US national interest in Syria is (even more in the articles excluded from the final analysis). In contrast, if we were to take the *China Daily* as evidence, the Chinese state has no interest whatsoever in the matter. On the pages of the *China Daily*, China acts completely selflessly, as an "unyielding defender of the UN Charter and a staunch supporter of the UN's leading role in maintaining world peace and development" (18 July 2012a). It is only "the West" that is "driven by geopolitical ambitions" (24 July 2012) and that aims to remove "a regime that is an obstacle to their policies in the Middle East" (06 February 2012a). Although this tone is often comical to the Western reader, even when avoiding value

judgment, it is clear that China views itself, or wants to be viewed, as a selfless defender of human rights. Whether this is a reaction to the criticism long aimed at China as a human rights abuser, or whether it has more to do with cultural traditions cannot be decided in this article.

As the evidence cited in the previous paragraph makes obvious, van Dijk's (2006) ideological square of "de/emphasiz[ing] good/bad things of Us/Them" (p. 374) is clearly applicable here. The *China Daily* depicts a completely negative picture of the selfish, "maneuvering" (18 July 2012a) West, and contrasts it with the principled, selfless China. *The Washington Post* makes some effort to understand the Chinese perspective, and there is a piece in which China wins the comparison (15 February 2012b),⁹ but generally, it is the human rights abuser that is contrasted with the American "moral standing" (14 July 2012b). In more sociological terms, both newspapers were engaged in the Othering of the opposing side.

Ultimately, the thematic macrostructure of the articles in the sample point to two distinct policy discourses. As expected, the *China Daily* presents a case for the principle of Sovereignty, while *The Washington Post*, with one exception, argues for R2P. Both newspapers employed various frames to discursively construct the two, often opposing principles.

In Legal framing, *The Washington Post* opinion pieces (with one exception) apply R2P media advocacy to invoke two specific codifications, the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN's 2001 R2P vote. The pieces either suggest or outright say that R2P overrides Sovereignty concerns.

The opinion pieces in *China Daily* all come down on the side of the Legal argument for Sovereignty and refer to the founding charter of the United Nations, but also go back as far as the Peace of Westphalia. The opinion pieces also refer to hundreds of years of legal precedent, such as the concepts from various articles calling for "non-interference" and "equality" in their discursively constructed advocacy for the principle of Sovereignty. The coding scheme is shown in Table 2.

The Value Coding (noted with an "x" in Table 2 and representing the Values—Legal, Historical, Rights, and Interests—that are key in the researched Opinion articles) and Framing Coding (those aspects of the Opinion articles that are focused on the Framing of an argument) of the discourse is binary, with *China Daily* creating an advocacy discourse on the side of Sovereignty exclusively and *The Washington Post*, with one exception, creating an advocacy discourse for R2P.

The discourse created in the text of the opinion pieces was coded into general principles and policies that are advocated, and those principles and policies are then broken down into their constituent elements, as will here be synthesized.

Historical precedent is used by both principles in most articles as a justification for the advocated preference. Sovereignty discourse used history as a warning, as when one Chinese author argued that R2P actions by the United States in the past have brought "deaths, destitution, and humanitarian crises" (26 July 2012).

Not only have the two camps found a series of reinforcing arguments to support their discourse, but they also use silence to advocate for their preferred policy and principle. In the case of Sovereignty advocacy, *China Daily* pieces keep silent as to the validity or precedent of the R2P principle; the opposite is also true for the R2P pieces, though a few of the pieces acknowledge the competing legal principle.

The framing of the discourse and the categorization allows for a means by which to order both measured and vitriolic rhetoric under the coded rubrics; what is not measured (as the categories are defined) is any intensity or extremity in the use of language, though this is a natural consequence of any coding scheme that aims to reduce complexity. What is lost in this exercise is the ability to

Table 2. Value Coding (x) and Framing Coding for the Opinion articles in both *The Washington Post* and the *China Daily*.

<i>China Daily</i>	<i>The Washington Post</i>
Sovereignty	R2P
Legal x	Legal x
Historical x	Historical x
Regime change—external	Revolution—internal
More bloodshed	More bloodshed
Domino theory	Domino theory
Legitimization of state	Legitimization of action
Othering (“the West”)	Othering (China and Russia)
Titling (President Assad)	Dehumanizing (Assad and Junta)
Independent choices	Irrationality
Imperial designs	Vital national interests x
Near silence on “R2P”	Near silence on “Sovereignty”
State’s rights x	Human rights x
Regional destabilization	Regional security

R2P: Responsibility to Protect.

identify phrases such as “cold blooded massacres” and “slide into anarchy” (06 February 2012) that are used by the R2P camp in the media and instead fall under the rubric of “More Bloodshed”; the Sovereign media camp falls under the same category when it refers to “the cruel reality in Iraq is enough to shatter the premise of unwarranted outside intervention” (25 July 2012).

Domino theory covers both as well. R2P pieces argue for stopping the Syrian crisis via intervention because “only then will murderous dictators think twice” while multiple Sovereignty pieces bring up the question raised by one author of “what Arab country will be next?” (09 June 2012). The domino theory argues that what happens in this instance will only be the first in a series of consequent and similar events over time.

The remaining categories, too, are fixed in their binary coded analytical framework: where *The Washington Post* pieces dehumanize the Syrian leadership by referring to them as a “junta” (06 February 2012) and “murderous dictators” (09 June 2012) or the head of state as just plain “Assad,” the *China Daily* pieces confer legitimacy on the leadership by referring to their actions as “the independent choice of the Syrian people” (26 July 2012) and giving the head of state his given title of “President Assad.”

The previous section already points to the next level of the discourse to be analyzed: the lexical, syntactical, and grammatical choices of the newspapers, that is, the microstructures of the texts. This analysis will be carried out by a close reading of a few key articles. Since the research question focuses on the (re)presentation of China in the discourse, the analysis will focus on the phrases describing China and its actions.

Why another UN draft resolution vetoed, China Daily, 06 February 2012

The article begins on a factual tone. It describes the veto, and that it was the second time Russia and China blocked a UNSC resolution on Syria. The second paragraph also appears to be factual; upon closer reading, however, the direction into which the reader is guided becomes obvious:

Analysts here said the failure of the draft resolution to clear the UNSC reveals a serious division among the 15 members of the council, which has the primary responsibility for the maintenance of peace and security in the world at large.

The source for the claim is unnamed “analysts.” The actor is missing, too: it is the failure of the draft resolution that it was not cleared, not an act of the member states that did not allow it go through. Furthermore, the UNSC is defined here as the organization with the primary responsibility to maintain world peace. Since what the veto blocked was a military intervention, this phrasing of the UNSC’s function supports those who vetoed:

The vote drew worldwide attention as Russia and major Western nations, led by the United States, Britain and France, differed sharply over the situation in Syria.

The division here, interestingly, is not between Russia and China versus the West, but Russia alone. In addition, the phrase “major Western nations” recalls age-old Cold War scripts about the rift between the West and Russia.

The article goes on to describe how the vote had to be pushed back 3 hours because of the consultations, then quotes from the draft explaining which section was the obstacle of the agreement:

Despite a series of minor revisions to the draft made by its co-sponsors, including some Arab states and the United States, Britain and France, the bulk of the position remained intact.

Here, the author repeats the phrase “United States, Britain and France,” further emphasizing the old rift:

Observers said that if the draft were adopted, the likely scenario would be a “regime change” in Syria.

Relying on unnamed “observers” as the source of the justification for the veto is a rather weak form of argument in a newspaper article. The effect of the argument is further reduced by the intransitive grammatical structures: first, the passive voice in “if the draft was adopted,” and second, by the phrasing “the likely scenario would be.” The same meaning could be conveyed in a much more direct manner attributing blame to the sponsors of the draft—yet the paper chose to tread carefully here:

Russia had expressed its serious concern over the draft text. During the council consultations, Russia warned against meddling in the internal affairs of Syria, and worked hard to avoid a replay of the Libya model, in which the NATO military helped topple Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi.

What could have been interpreted as an implicitly strong threat is here understood as a warning, and a just one at that: it is a warning against “meddling in the internal affairs” of a sovereign country. Russia is praised by the author (it “worked hard”) to avoid what happened in Libya. As discussed above, however, Libya for the American commentators is not such an overwhelmingly negative case.

The “Russia versus the West” narrative is further reinforced when the allegedly hard-working Russia, laboring for a compromise, is presented as being met by “Western powers pushing for a vote on the draft”:

Hours before the council entered into the scheduled meeting Saturday morning, with Western powers pushing for a vote on the draft, Russia circulated an amended draft resolution which, as Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, “aims to fix two basic problems.”

The problems are described in a direct quote by Lavrov; he and the Chinese UN ambassador are the two persons quoted in full sentences. The US ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice is quoted with a brief “unacceptable” as a response. However, the quote used by the Russian ambassador, claiming that the resolution “did not adequately reflect the real state of affairs in Syria and has sent an unbalanced signal to the Syrian parties” seems to be an important one: this is the third time it was repeated in 2 days in the paper.

Only after such a long presentation of the Russian case does the paper turn to the Chinese UN ambassador’s explanation of the Chinese veto:

“Like many council members, China maintains that, under the current circumstances, to put undue emphasis on pressing the Syrian government, prejudge the result of the dialogue or impose any solution will not help resolve the Syrian issue, but instead may further complicate the situation,” Li said.

The veto seems further hedged by the reference to the “many council members” who agreed with the Chinese (and Russian) position. It is also interesting that the reason given here is not the “not another regime change”-line—maybe because that argument was not supported by “many council members”? In any case, China is certainly not depicted here as a brave champion of principles, standing up for the Syrian people. Rather, the Chinese veto is underplayed here in its effect as well as given the support of “many council members.”

The next section, again, refers to the “point of difference between Russia and major Western powers.” Again, this is noted for its Othering of the West as well as for the lack of mentioning China. Immediately after that, however, it is revealed that “Russia and China” were “actively engaged in consultations.” Furthermore, Russia was also making a diplomatic effort to meet with “Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.” As noted above, calling him “Syrian President” gives Assad a degree of legitimacy that he is usually denied of in the Western media.

The paper does not leave any doubt who it thinks to be right in this situation:

Russia’s positive moves deserve support from the international community. France and other Western powers, however, ignored the legitimate concerns of Russia and other countries and called instead for an immediate vote Saturday on the draft, using the pretext of what they called the urgency of the situation in Syria.

The adjectives “positive” and “legitimate” confers credibility on Russia, while “France and other Western powers” used a “pretext” to push through the vote. This, again, builds on the West versus Russia script, and from this perspective, Russia is the hero in the story. Also note the use of “Russia and some other countries,” which, again, does not specify China.

Finally, the article quotes the Chinese ambassador at length, explaining that China supports the revised draft and a continued consultation. This piece presents China as a passive follower of the Russian example. It is Russia’s arguments that are explained; in fact, the main Chinese point as revealed from other pieces, namely that intervention would lead to a forced regime change in Syria is brought up only in a very vague and weak manner. According to this article, China did not act independently. Its role is diminished both by the author and by the Chinese ambassador, who keeps referring to “some countries” or “many council members” agreeing with it in the UNSC.

This is a rather unexpected finding, particularly if one takes into account the fact that the piece was authored by the Chinese state news agency *Xinhua*. In order to see whether it is a singular outlier, another editorial published on the same day, reflecting on the same event, is analyzed here in detail. This piece is not bylined, following the conventional way of signaling that it is a staff editorial, representing, so to speak, the official stance of the newspaper.

Avoiding civil war in Syria, China Daily, 02 June 2012

The headline of the piece already offers an interpretative framework: the veto was not about political maneuvering or outside interests but about avoiding civil war. This is a firmly presented script as opposed to the previous article, which stated nothing in its title. The upbeat tone of the article also confers more agency on China in one paragraph than the previous article did altogether:

When China joined hands with Russia on Saturday to veto an Arab-European draft UN resolution backing an Arab League plan to promote a regime change in Syria, its stance was consistent with its approach to international issues.

The phrase “joined hands” suggests an equal partnership with Russia. The two countries together form a block against the Other, which, rather surprisingly, is not the United States but rather the “Arab-European” members of the council. The “Arabness” is emphasized once more, while the previous article repeatedly used the term “the United States, Britain and France” as the opposing bloc. There, the very same draft that here is described as “backing an Arab League plan” was identified as co-sponsored by “some Arab states and the United States, Britain and France.”

Furthermore, the first paragraph also lays out the thesis sentence that China has been consistent in its approach. There is no mention of the Libya vote where China abstained, and which then, presumably, was not consistent with China’s approach.

The following paragraph explains the major Chinese problem with the resolution, used as a repeated refrain in other pieces throughout the coverage of the conflict:

The draft resolution that sought to realize a regime change in Syria did not adequately reflect the state of affairs in this Middle East country.

Furthermore, the paragraph repeats the phrase by the Russian ambassador to the UN (“did not adequately reflect ...”) without attributing it to him, suggesting that the paper identifies with it completely.

In the next section, the identity of the Other shifts

In putting the resolution to the vote, Western powers hoped to further exert pressure on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down, thus paving the way for the removal of a regime that is an obstacle to their policies in the Middle East.

It is no longer the Arab-European bloc but “Western powers” that are in conflict with China; and the reason for this is their selfish desire to act in their own national interest against not a “murderous dictator,” as Assad is repeatedly referred to in *The Washington Post*, but the legitimate “Syrian President.” The consequences of the Western selfishness is spelled out in detail:

By only exerting pressure on the Syrian government and explicitly trying to coerce its leader al-Assad to step down, the resolution sends the message to armed groups and opponents of his regime that they have the support of the international community. This will undoubtedly make the Syrian situation even more complicated and make it impossible for all parties to reach a conciliatory agreement that is in the best interests of the country and its people.

Although the paragraph uses strong words such as “coerce,” “undoubtedly,” and “impossible,” the blame is somewhat deflected by being put on the resolution and not directly on the countries behind it. Citing the Libyan case, the question of responsibility is more explicit:

We’ve seen what happened in Libya. With the armed intervention by some major Western powers, the Libyan regime was overthrown. But instead of the democracy and freedom they were promised, Libyan people cannot even live in peace as the country is in the danger of falling into a sectarian civil war.

The countries are not individually named, but the phrase “some major Western powers” activates the mental script of the old opposition between China and the West. Nonetheless, the author resorts to using the passive voice both when referring to the ousting of Gaddafi (“With the armed intervention ... the regime was overthrown”) and what is viewed here as a disastrous consequence (nothing came of the “democracy and freedom [Libyan people] were promised”). It is only implied that it is “the major Western powers” that are behind the unkept promises.

The next sections argue that intervention will lead to a “messy civil war,” bringing “even greater misery” for the Syrian people. With the Chinese position fully explained, the piece now turns to describe Russia’s stance as “reasonable” and the Russian diplomatic efforts, often ridiculed in the Western press, presented as if all they needed was time to bear fruit “for the good of the country” [Syria]. This is implicitly contrasted with the Western goals, which would not be for the good of Syria but for Western self-interests.

The final paragraph is one factually presented statement:

The Chinese government believes that, in line with the UN Charter, political consultations are the best way to help a nation solve any political crisis.

Emphasizing that the Chinese government is in line with the UN Charter suggests that those supporting the resolution are not. Furthermore, presenting the Syrian conflict as a “political crisis,” which a nation needs to solve argues for the Sovereignty principle. This also sets the limits on outside intervention: the nation can be “helped” to solve its crisis, but ultimately, it is their own business.

Contrasting this article with the previous one, published on the same day on the same issue offers some conflicting ways in which China is viewed in this article. While the previously analyzed article depicted China as a passive follower of Russia, almost denied of its agency, here China is showed very much as an independent actor, having its own views on why the veto was needed. The previous article interpreted the conflict as one between Russia and the West, with China only playing a minor role; here, the conflict is between the major Western powers, as well as some Arab nations, and China.

As the Syrian conflict continued, and China exercised its veto power yet again, the tone of the articles became firmer, and the country came to be depicted more and more as an active agent, as a “staunch supporter” of the UN principles, acting out of a selfless desire to help the Syrian people.

While the Russian connection is never denied, in the forcefully argued 26 July op-ed “Right to decide own future” “Russia and China” finally became “China and Russia,” suggesting more agency for China.

The Washington Post, as discussed above, has covered the Syrian crisis as well as China extensively, yet the opinion pieces discussing the vetoes focused almost exclusively on Russia and on making the case for R2P. At most, China gets a brief mention such as “Russia and China, with veto power, don’t want sanctions” (14 July 2012a), or “China, worried about interference in human rights abusers’ internal affairs, has joined Russia in protecting Damascus in the U.N. Security Council” (14 July 2012b). This suggests that *The Washington Post* does not consider China an important, active, independent agent in this conflict, only in connection with Russia. Nonetheless, China’s supposed motives are clearly put in the above piece (as well as in the pieces that deal with China but mention the Syrian conflict only in passing): far from being the selfless supporter of the Sovereignty principle, the assumption is that it acts out of self-interest. Yet, as discussed above in the section on the general “realpolitik” approach to foreign affairs in the *Post*, the same assumption is made, both implicitly and explicitly, about every participant in the conflict, including the United States.

Conclusion

This article started out from the observation that the Chinese and Russian veto of the resolutions on Syria at the UNSC confounded analysts and commentators. While Russia’s action was generally explained with its long-held ties to the Assad-regime, China could not be accused of such connections. Furthermore, if one is looking for a material interest-based explanation, China should have used its veto power in Libya, where it abstained, and not in Syria where it has relatively little economic interest. So did China veto the Syrian resolutions because it realized that not preventing the UNSC measures that lead to the toppling of the Gaddafi-regime in Libya went contrary to its long-held principles of non-interference? Or is the Syrian veto a sign of a newly emerging, confident China, claiming its position in actively participating in international conflicts? This article turned to the official English-language newspaper *China Daily* for a clue on how the Chinese discourse wants China to be seen by the world with regard to its role in this foreign policy crisis. For comparative purposes on how the Chinese behavior was interpreted in the American media, *The Washington Post* articles were also studied.

The analysis found that while certain elements, such as China as the staunch, selfless defender of the Sovereignty principle were consistent, whether China is looking at itself as a powerful new entrant in the big game, or whether it views the veto as a return to its isolationist traditions was ambiguous. First depreciating the Chinese veto as almost invisible when compared to the Russian position, as the conflict continued, the *China Daily* then came to present China as more active and independent, as following its own lead and as confident to be on the right side of history. At the same time, the global framework in which the Syrian conflict was interpreted in the whole period studied here remained limited. In contrast with *The Washington Post*’s situating the Syrian crisis in a global world with prefigurations and (geographically) wide-ranging consequences, the *China Daily* rarely looked beyond the horizon. This suggests that China is not planning to proactively interfere in international conflicts. The fact that Russian diplomatic endeavors are given such an emphasis without any mention of China planning anything similar also supports this conclusion.

As for the American discourse, *The Washington Post* clearly does not regard China as an important player in this conflict. The focus is all on Russia. At the same time, China’s motives are viewed as consistently as they are in the Chinese press, but they are on opposing ends of the spectrum: the

principled defender of the rights of the Syrian people presented in the *China Daily* is unanimously viewed as a human rights abuser afraid of outside intervention in *The Washington Post*.

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Notes

1. There was a vote on 4 October 2011, where China and Russia also used its veto power, but it contained less extensive means to be employed in Syria. Russia and China were also less isolated in the vote with four non-permanent (and thus, lacking veto power) members expressing their disagreement through abstention.
2. Using search engines for this type of research does have its inherent limitations. Given the large number of articles either on China or on Syria, it was necessary, for *The Washington Post* search to include both search terms, as the goals of this article is to explore how reporting on this particular case, the veto on the draft resolution regarding Syria, depicts China's role in international politics. However, this inevitably led to some arbitrary elements in the data. For example, the *Post* ran a series of op-eds on China, but only one of them mentions, briefly, Syria; that piece got included while the rest were not yielded as a result in the search. Likewise, a *China Daily* piece describing how China, "[d]espite being a developing country" has provided "selfless and wide-ranging foreign aid" to other developing regions, "demonstrat[ing] its role as a responsible world power" did not explicitly mention Syria and thus, it was excluded ("Make foreign aid more effective and balanced," *China Daily*, 25 July 2012).
3. One of the *China Daily* opinion pieces, "Why another UN draft resolution on Syria vetoed" (06 February 2012) which appeared in a section entitled "From Chinese Press" (sic), was bylined as *Xinhua* (state news agency).
4. In its factual news pieces, *China Daily* does use such evocative terms as "mass killing" and "massacre" when describing particularly violent incidents in Syria (e.g. "China strongly condemns mass killing in Syria," 14 July 2012, and "UN mission probes massacre in Syrian village," 15 July 2012). These, however, do not make it into the opinion pieces of the newspaper.
5. Furthermore, the Syria-related op-eds and editorials in *The Washington Post*, excluded from the present analysis because they made no reference to China, all argued for a military intervention.
6. Again, a large number of China-related articles were excluded as they did not refer to the Syrian conflict, which this article is taken as its focal point.
7. This was even more so in some of the articles that did not directly deal with China and were, therefore, excluded.
8. As for *The Washington Post*, several articles that dealt with the Syrian case were excluded from the analysis due to the fact that they focused only on Russia of the two countries.
9. This, however, might be an unfair comparison resulting from the sampling procedure. As discussed above, *The Washington Post* dealt extensively with China, dedicating a whole series of articles to present various perspectives (by various guest authors) on the Asian superpower. It cannot be deemed impossible that *China Daily* had a similar series on the United States (or "the West"), which was, however, not sampled.

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