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China and the UN Security Council: From Observer to Activist

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Summary

China's recent activism in the United Nations Security Council, the epicentre of global security politics, is indicative of this emerging power's capacity to adapt in order to defend its interests abroad and maintain stability at home. Conscious of the need to conduct foreign policy in a manner commensurate with its new economic standing, Beijing has embarked on a period of unprecedented international advocacy, with Africa serving as a key proving ground. Where it was once opposed to any form of international intervention in the domestic affairs of states, the Chinese government is becoming an active participant in UN peacekeeping, providing over 7,500 military observers, engineers, medical teams and other specialists in support of UN peacekeeping operations to provide. Beyond China's desire to enhance its geopolitical influence on the international stage are a range of internal factors that can only be addressed through sustained economic development and continuing participation in the global economy.

China's participation in several UN-sponsored peacekeeping operations, its willingness to allow certain resolutions under Chapter VII to pass, and the appointment of a special envoy for Africa, Ambassador Liu Guijin, shows that engagement with Africa is changing this Asian power, and that the People's Republic of China (PRC) is determined to become a responsible stakeholder in the global system. Although it is highly unlikely that China would pursue a policy that contravenes its non-interventionist stance, clearly events in Africa have demonstrated that it will make concessions when faced with stronger claims to its national interest. With its reputation as a 'responsible stakeholder' in the international system among Western governments at risk due to the conflict in Darfur, Beijing has demonstrated that it can use its influence with unsavoury states to force them to encourage compliance with the UN.

China's ascent in international politics

The People's Republic of China has replaced its era of hermetic communism and revolutionary fervour with a pragmatic and calculated approach to multilateral diplomacy. Gone are the days when China stood on the sidelines observing the goings on in the UN Security Council. China is not only an active participant in important international decision making, but is prepared to make concessions on principles

that it previously refused to concede on, or to reinterpret situations on a case-to-case basis. Beijing's 'calculative' strategy is aimed at increasing the internal and external legitimacy of its political system, expand the country's technological and economic capabilities, and secure its influence in the international political order.² Formerly reactive, but now assertive, China's engagement with multilateral institutions is evolving.

In the last decade, China has undergone some institutional and bureaucratic changes that have ultimately led to policy content reform. One example is the creation, in late 2000, of a National Security Leading Small Group entrusted with managing crises.³ Previously functioning as static bureaucratic entities, several ministries (such as the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations, the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Central Military Board, among others) are now working together in the formulation of foreign and security policy.⁴ The emergence of a third and now fourth generation of leadership within the Chinese Communist Party is recasting some of the old shibboleths of party-government relations. Domestic political dynamics are changing through the structures and roles of institutions, the changing views of the elite, the growing impact of public opinion and the forces of globalisation.

Under Deng Xiaoping,⁵ policy making on national security issues and external affairs was still largely centralised within the small group of top party leaders. The Foreign Ministry today is actively marketing its global profile and is expanding its interactions with the international community. A new generation of highly sophisticated, forward-looking diplomats and policymakers is emerging from China trained in UN-speak. Once viewed by authorities in Beijing as forums for criticising and monitoring China, the UN and other multilateral institutions are now perceived as important avenues in which to pursue the country's economic interests, address security threats and expand its influence.⁶

China's voting behaviour in the UN Security Council

After taking its seat in the UN in 1971 and becoming a permanent veto-wielding member of the Security Council, China's position in the Security Council was one of studied passivity. It has only used its veto on five occasions: against recognition of Bangladesh (on behalf of Pakistan), on the Middle East question in 1972, on Taiwan-related issues regarding Macedonia (1997) and Guatemala (1999), and most recently in 2007 to block measures aimed at easing political oppression in Myanmar (2007). But from this status as a virtual non-participant, China has slowly become more involved in the Security Council, voting in 1981 for the extension of a UN peacekeeping force in Cyprus, and agreeing to send Chinese civilians to help monitor the Namibian transition to independence in 1989. Nevertheless, despite these cautious steps towards activism, between 1990 and 1999 China abstained 41 times when contentious issues were on the negotiating table, like the use of force, humanitarian intervention and the establishment of international criminal tribunals.

The political events of 1989, in particular the Tiananmen massacre and the accompanying Western sanctions campaign, merely reinforced China's already firm opposition to the principle of foreign intervention by the international community. In order for China to support any form of intervention, three requirements had to be in place: an intervention must have UN authorisation, it must respect national sovereignty and it must be at the invitation of the target state.⁷ However, throughout the 1990s, China did begin to show that it was willing to play a co-operative role in international politics by participating in UN peacekeeping operations.

In 1991 China showed its support for the UN's enforcement initiatives in Somalia under Chapter VII, but a year later, once the mission arrived in Mogadishu, took a step back and abstained from subsequent resolutions. Between 1993 and 1994 Beijing sent a group of military observers to join the UNOMOZ mission in Mozambique, and in 2003 the Democratic Republic of the Congo received

218 peacekeepers from the People's Liberation Army, the first significant deployment of Chinese personnel in Africa under the UN banner. Since 2003 China has, under UN Security Council resolution 1509, contributed to the peacekeeping mission in Liberia with six detachments of troops and engineers, the latest containing a total of 2,800 peacekeepers.

Although there are signs of change in China's interactions with the international community, authorities in Beijing seek to differentiate China from other leading states, like the US, by giving voice to the developing world and thus, on this basis, defending its own interests in these regions. Acting as the representative of the developing world, China aims at retaining its legitimacy by being sensitive to the issue of national sovereignty and territorial integrity, because of its experience with foreign occupation, and at the same time understanding the political and security concerns that the other five permanent members express in the UN Security Council. This has resulted in a refined balancing act between China's realpolitik interests and its concern for its reputation as the international advocate for Third World causes. There are, however, some Chinese analysts that stress the need for Beijing to develop deeper ties with the G-8 countries. This impulse was reflected, for instance, in a strategy proposed by Jiang Zemin during the Sixteenth National Party Congress in 2002, which called for China to pursue a great-power relations policy (*ga guo guanxi*).

The more China involves itself with Africa, Latin America and the rest of Asia through trade, financial interdependencies, aid programmes, and strategic bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, it will invariably be involved in every major international issue to come up in the UN Security Council and all other multilateral bodies. Kim suggests that '[t]he PRC is inescapably part of both the world-order problem and the world-order solution ... rising China holds one of the master keys to the future of globalisation in the post Cold-War world.'⁸ However, as a rising power, China does not want to disrupt the international status quo. It cannot afford a direct conflict with the US and does not want to trigger any containment policies from that quarter either.

The Africa factor in China's foreign policy

Two situations emerging out of Chinese engagement with Africa have demonstrated Beijing's ability to adapt to changing international realities. When the Western governments began their shaming campaign against China on the Darfur issue and international activists started referring to the 2008 Olympics as the 'Genocide Olympics', alarm bells rang in Beijing. Moving beyond the sense of outrage and concern felt by the Chinese, for whom hosting the event is a great source of national pride, China brought renewed pressure to bear on Khartoum to accept UN terms for a hybrid peacekeeping force. And when China's vested interests in the Horn of Africa became increasingly threatened by local instability, Beijing reacted and prompted the UN to intervene in Somalia, thereby securing its business dealings in the north of the country and helping stabilise the region.

Sudan

Sudan was the first African country to be the recipient of major Chinese investment in the energy sector. At a time when Western governments had imposed sanctions against the embattled regime in Khartoum, Chinese officials embarked on a conscious policy of developing closer ties with the oil-rich Sudan. Within four years, following China's initial investment of over \$3 billion and the building of the entire Sudanese oil industry infrastructure under the lead of Chinese engineering and construction teams, Sudan had become an oil exporter. Through China National Petroleum and Gas Company's stake in the Greater Nile Petroleum Corporation, Sudan provides approximately 5–7% of China's oil imports.⁹ China's two-way trade with Sudan rocketed to \$3.9 billion in 2005, and Sudan is now host to tens of thousands of Chinese involved in everything from import-export businesses to infrastructure development.

In Sudan, after three long harrowing years of negotiations characterised in part by Beijing's defence of the regime in Khartoum, China voted along with the Security Council in

favour of a decisive resolution that empowers UN troops to use 'all necessary means' to protect themselves, defend civilians and secure the safe passage of aid. Resolution 1769 is significant because the 26,000 troops and police being deployed to the region are mandated under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which permits the use of force. This is a clear indication that China is changing the contours of its non-interference policy, although the resolution ostensibly has Sudanese support.

In many ways, China successfully dampened some of the key sources behind international condemnation of Khartoum's alleged role in Darfur¹⁰ by persuading the Sudanese government to accept UN Security Council resolution 1769 in June 2007. Western governments in particular praised China's role in this process. The motives for such forceful diplomatic manoeuvres with the government of Sudan and the international community are connected to Beijing's concern over its reputation and image. China's actions are providing a sneak preview of how its Africa policy will shape its global stance as an influential political and economic giant.

Another important development took place while China chaired the UN Security Council in April 2006. Resolution 1672 was passed imposing sanctions on four individuals accused of being involved in the atrocities in Darfur. In a carefully worded statement, China's ambassador to the UN, Wang Guangya, noted that sanctions had a chequered record of success and tended to victimise the civilian population, and for this reason China chose to abstain.¹¹ Although Beijing abstained at the time of the vote, it nonetheless allowed the Security Council to pass targeted sanctions, something China had always been hostile to in the past.

Beijing's actions regarding Sudan prove that it is prepared to recondition its policy of non-interference in order to secure the protection of its huge investments and interests in Africa. They also illustrate how Beijing's image abroad and the way in which it is perceived internationally are important elements of its foreign policy engagement. Greatly misunderstood by the world, this emerging power is now exercising subtle

assertiveness to influence friends and win over enemies. China played a significant role in securing what the UN secretary-general, Ban Ki-moon, hailed as a 'historic and unprecedented' step towards the resolution of the conflict in Darfur. The UN peacekeeping force there, UNAMID, will be the largest peacekeeping force in the world.

Somalia

Despite China's initial reluctance to continue supporting a UN mission in Somalia in the 1990s, which it viewed as being intrusive, it has recently, to the surprise of all other 15 Security Council members, taken the lead in proposing foreign intervention in this same country. In June 2007 the Chinese UN ambassador, Wang Guangya, urged diplomats at the UN Security Council mission meeting in Addis Ababa to take action in Somalia: 'I was reluctant to take this role but there was a lack of interest by other major powers', explained Wang, after stating that China had been pressured by African governments to raise the issue in the Security Council.

In February the Security Council unanimously authorised a six-month African Union (AU) peacekeeping mission to Somalia, which made provisions for the AU troops to take military action to secure the government, humanitarian organisations and infrastructure. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon was then requested to look into the possibility of deploying a UN peacekeeping operation. The UN is now considering a three-point plan to stabilise the Horn of Africa by proposing measures targeting reconciliation, the continuation of humanitarian efforts and general security reinforcement.

'Each country has to provide the well-being of their own people. In some countries there is a problem and people are neglected', Wang Guangya¹² stated regarding China's position on intervention. It is indicative of Beijing's willingness to act on its commitment that it signed off on the 'responsibility to protect' principle during the 2005 World Summit.

This initiative marks yet another turning point in Beijing's willingness to get involved in conflicts in Africa. In December 2006, the conflict in Somalia spilled over into

other countries of the Horn when Ethiopian-backed Somali forces (supporting the interim government) staged an attack aimed at ousting the Islamists in the capital, Mogadishu. Over 60% of the residents of Mogadishu have fled their homes, bringing to a total of one million the number of internally displaced Somalis. In Ethiopia itself, the situation is also deteriorating as government troops recently initiated a military campaign to defeat the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), operating in the Somali region of the country and with links to the Islamist militias in Somalia. Chinese energy exploration facilities in the region have been continuously targeted by the ONLF.

In July 2007 the Financial Times reported that the Chinese National Offshore Corporation had signed a deal with Abdullahi Yusuf, the interim Somali president, allowing it to explore the Puntland region for oil. The terms of the bilateral production-sharing agreement indicate that the government would retain 51% of the oil revenues. At the time of the agreement, a new national oil law was being drafted by the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia, making China's investment even riskier due to uncertainty about the legal environment.

It has become quite clear that China's competitive advantage in Africa is its willingness to invest in politically unstable countries (Somalia has been without an effective government since 1991), which is a consequence of being a latecomer in the

global quest for energy security. The Somali deal was concluded even after nine Chinese workers had been killed in Ethiopia, near the Somali border, a few months earlier.

Conclusion

Deng Xiaoping's philosophy of 'bide our time, build our capabilities' (*taoguang yanghui*) and 'never take the lead' (*bu chu tou*),¹³ which guided Chinese foreign policy for decades, had previously been translated into a reluctance to take the lead in any international issue at the UN.

What has become apparent is that through Chinese activism on African issues at the UN, Beijing is in the process of redefining its relationship with the international community. Slowly but surely, Beijing's diplomatic strategy is beginning to mirror its highly assertive international energy policy, and Africa is providing the litmus test of this new, modern diplomacy. As new humanitarian norms develop and new expectations of the international community's responsibility and right to intervene emerge, normative obstacles to national sovereignty seem to be eroding. Because China is in a unique position, sustaining the identity of a developing state while simultaneously becoming increasingly defined as a superpower, Beijing can afford to act on a case-by-case basis as it redefines its foreign policy, while not committing itself

formally to any significant policy change on key issues like sovereignty. This is reflected in the fact that, notwithstanding the signals regarding issues like Sudan and Somalia, China's changing approach to participation in the UN does not diminish its formal commitment to the principle of non-intervention, nor any decisions to provide diplomatic cover for regimes like that of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe.

At the same time, this new Chinese assertiveness within the UN carries with it considerable costs and pitfalls. The pointed declaration by one of Darfur's rebel groups that the arrival of a contingent of 135 Chinese peacekeepers in November 2007 would themselves be targeted reflects the rebels' belief that Beijing has been a late — and fundamentally reluctant — convert to international action in Sudan. The growing frequency with which Chinese technicians, aid workers and even businessmen are targeted by dissident elements in Africa signals that Chinese involvement, even when framed within a UN mission, is not always perceived as benevolent. Though 'unburdened' by the open media found in democracies, nonetheless the Chinese government has to take cognisance of its own elite, business and informed domestic opinion in forging its Africa policy. How this increasingly complex and sometimes negative reaction to deepening engagement will impact on China's activism in Africa remains to be seen. ■

Endnotes

- 1 Paula Cristina Roque is the Research Coordinator for the China in Africa Project at the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA). Chris Alden is the Head of the China in Africa project at SAIIA and a Senior Lecturer at the London School of Economics
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- 3 Lampton DM, 'The making of Chinese foreign and security policy', in Gompert D, F Godement, E Medieros & J Malvenon, *China on the Move: A Franco-American Analysis of Emerging Chinese Strategic Policies*. Santa Monica: RAND, 2005, p. 33.
- 4 Lampton DM (ed.), *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform, 1978–2000*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- 5 Effective leader of the PRC from 1978 to the early 1990s.
- 6 Gompert D et al., op. cit., p.29.
- 7 Carlson A, 'More than just saying no: China's evolving approach to sovereignty and intervention since Tiananmen', in Johnston AI & R Ross (eds), *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006, p.217.
- 8 Kim SS, 'Chinese foreign policy faces globalization challenges', in Johnston AI & R Ross (eds), op. cit., p.277.
- 9 The amount is both a matter of dispute and subject to the changing profile of Chinese imports from other sources like Angola.
- 10 The conflict in Darfur, a region in western Sudan, began in 2003. The two main rebel groups — the Sudan Liberation Army and the Justice and Equality Movement — claim that the region has been continuously neglected
- by Khartoum and that the government favours the Arabs over the black African population. Khartoum is accused of arming 'self-defence' militias known as the Janjaweed to deal with this rebellion. Millions of Darfuris are now living in temporary camps, 200,000 have died as a result of the conflict and 200,000 have fled to neighbouring Chad.
- 11 'Security Council passes travel, financial sanctions on 4 Sudanese, adopting resolution 1672 (2006) by 12-0-3', Department of Public Information, UN SC 8770, 25 April 2006, <<http://www.un.org.news>>.
- 12 Interview with Traub J, 'The world according to China', New York Times, 3 September 2006.
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