

China jumps in - Opinion - International Herald Tribune

Stephanie Kleine-Ahbrandt and Andrew Small
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We are getting used to seeing new faces of Chinese diplomacy and on President Hu Jintao's latest trip to Africa we will see the unlikeliest of all. In making his most visible push for the settlement of the Darfur crisis, Hu will signal a quiet revolution in Chinese attitudes to sovereignty and noninterference, and position China as the protector of the repressed citizens of the region.

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This revolution has two sources: China's increasing sensitivity to outrage over its international behavior and a stark reassessment of its political interests.

China's foreign policy transformation has been a while in the making. Its long-standing protection of the Sudanese regime was already unraveling during the China-Africa summit meeting in Beijing in early November when Hu raised the issue with President Omar al-Bashir of Sudan. China's ambassador to the UN, Wang Guangya, then made crucial interventions at the November meeting in Addis Ababa to secure Sudan's agreement, albeit temporary, to replace the African Union contingent with a larger hybrid AU-UN force. These moves earned the praise of the American special envoy for Sudan, Andrew Natsios, who recently affirmed that Washington and Beijing were largely working in concert on Darfur.

Hu's visit to Africa reinforces the impression that China's forceful stance following the North Korean missile and nuclear tests last year was more than a tactical shift. By supporting the imposition of UN-endorsed sanctions, and stridently denouncing North Korea's behavior, China finally indicated that even its closest friends cannot expect quiescence if they cross certain lines.

The widespread recognition in Beijing that the North Korean issue had been mishandled over the previous year seems to have been a tipping point. An already growing sense among Chinese leaders that fence-sitting and providing unquestioned cover to allies could prove more costly to Chinese interests than active — even coercive — diplomacy is on its way to being a fixture in China's foreign policy doctrine.

At one level, this is simply the next phase of China's efforts to demonstrate the unthreatening nature of its rise and allay fears that its political, economic and military footprint in the world will damage Western interests. China is increasingly averse to being vilified as a new force for the protection of genocide and nuclear proliferation. While continuing to lend strong support to allies like Myanmar, China is implicitly serving notice to these countries that there are limits to its tolerance, and at the same time showing Washington that such relationships can offer an additional channel of influence.

Beyond being a public relations disaster for Beijing, Sudan poses a growing threat to regional stability. Risks abound for China on the African continent, placing its substantial

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investments, and even citizens, in danger. Its consolidation of ties with the leadership of a few regimes risks alienating large segments of the public and leading to instability that threatens Chinese interests. Anti-Chinese riots in Zambia followed elections in which the Chinese ambassador threatened to sever relations with the country if the opposition candidate won.

It is then perhaps unsurprising that historical wariness of international interventions has given way to growing support for UN peacekeeping. China has in recent months embarked on a steep change in both its troop contributions — now numbering 1666 — and diplomatic support for new missions. It has taken the lead for the first time to push for a deployment of peacekeepers to Somalia.

While the world should welcome China's overtures, there should be no illusions as to its limits.

The government has shown itself ready to act more responsibly, but its lack of respect for human rights at home still places constraints on the good that can come of the new policy. China is not prepared to support rights and freedoms in Africa beyond those it provides to its own citizens.

In the meantime, China is exporting some of its most dysfunctional domestic practices, including corruption, bad lending, disregard for labor rights and poor environmental standards. And yet the increasing temptation is to deal with China on global strategic issues, shying away from its internal problems. This is a mistake. The rest of the world's legitimate interest in China's domestic policy has never been higher. A limited and contingent attachment to international responsibility cannot substitute for real political liberalization inside China.

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