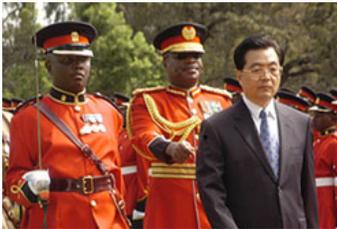


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# China, the Unlikely Human Rights Champion

 By [STEPHANIE T. KLEINE-AHLBRANDT](#), [ANDREW SMALL](#) | FEBRUARY 14, 2007


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Each time President Hu Jintao concludes a trip to Africa, he leaves a bigger Chinese footprint on the continent. Yet the imprint left by this February's visit is not just a result of the usual choreographed procession of trade deals, largesse, and south-south brotherhood. It also reflects a quiet revolution in Chinese attitudes toward non-interference, exemplified by Hu's most visible push yet for settlement of the Darfur crisis.

This most recent phase of China's foreign policy transformation has been building for several months. It has its roots in two sources: the country's growing sensitivity to opprobrium over its international behavior, and an increasingly sharp reassessment of its political interests, which are looking more like those of a great power rather than a developing country struggling to protect its sovereignty.

China's long-standing position on the purely internal nature of the Darfur conflict began to unravel during the Beijing summit when Hu first raised the issue with Sudanese President al-Bashir. China's UN Ambassador, Wang Guangya, made crucial interventions at the November 2006 meeting in Addis Ababa to secure Sudan's agreement, albeit temporary, to replace the African Union contingent with a larger, hybrid, African Union-UN force. These moves earned the praise of U.S. Special Envoy for Sudan Andrew Natsios, who recently affirmed that Washington and Beijing were largely working in concert on Darfur. China subsequently assured UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon of its support for resolution of the Darfur crisis.

Hu Jintao's meeting with al-Bashir in Khartoum, even if it fell short of the expectations of the most optimistic observers, nevertheless represented an important turning point. The delivery by the Chinese president of such a clear, detailed, and publicly reported message on Sudanese soil—setting out four principles for resolving the conflict that are "imperative to observe," including UN involvement in the proposed peacekeeping mission, ensuring the delivery of humanitarian aid, and the achievement of a comprehensive ceasefire—is the sort of action that China would have dubbed "unacceptable interference" in domestic affairs only a short time ago. In his report to the UN Security Council on Hu's trip, Wang pressed the point home in unambiguous terms: "Usually China doesn't send messages, but this time they [sic] did... It was a clear strong message that the proposal from Kofi Annan is a good one, and Sudan has to accept it."

## New Red Lines

The visit is further evidence 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 sanctions and denouncing North Korea's behavior, China indicated that even its closest friends cannot expect quiescence if they cross certain lines. The recognition in Beijing that the North Korean issue had been mishandled over the previous year, resulting in China's serious embarrassment, seems to have been a tipping point. A growing sense among Chinese leaders that fence-sitting and providing unquestioned cover to allies in the Security Council could prove more costly to Chinese interests than active,

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even coercive, Chinese diplomacy, is on its way to becoming a new fixture in China's foreign policy doctrine.

China's position is certainly not in seamless alignment with U.S. policy, despite the increasing degree of coordination and cooperation taking place between the two countries over these issues. In the cases of Sudan and North Korea, China has been criticized for not doing enough, by failing to exert serious economic pressure on the regimes. China faces similar charges over CNOOC's recent 16 billion dollar deal to develop the North Pars gas field in Iran. But, except in extremis, China is still reluctant to use its economic clout. Even the sanctions China supported on North Korea appear to have been intended more as a political message to the regime than as a framework for maintaining pressure.

For the moment, China's position appears closer to that of a broker. It is working to maintain trust and a certain level of dependency on the part of these countries, in order to ensure continued leverage and flexibility, while pushing toward negotiated solutions. As a model, this will be difficult for many to accept. Until it delivers clear results, China can expect continued ambivalence from those who view with suspicion its economic ties to problematic regimes. It would be shortsighted, however, to fail to differentiate between this new willingness to exert political pressure and the abdication of responsibility that had characterized Chinese behavior until recently.

At one level, these developments reflect 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 the reputational risks ensuing from the behavior of a Kim, an al-Bashir, or an Ahmadinejad, whereby it can be painted as a force for genocide protection and nuclear proliferation. While continuing to lend strong support to allies such as Myanmar, it is implicitly serving notice to these countries that there are limits to China's tolerance, however ill-defined these red lines currently are.

At the same time, China attempts to demonstrate to the world that its relationships with such countries can offer an additional channel of influence. But just as the manifest risks of a nuclearized East Asia have forced Beijing to see the behavior of Kim Jong Il's regime as a Chinese problem, so China's engagement in Africa is forcing it to formulate a broader understanding of its interests, beyond concerns with its international image and relations with the United States. Developing-world solidarity and mutual givingness is steadily giving way to the mindset of a great power.

#### **Africa: Crossing the River by Feeling for Stones**

It was inevitable that as China's exposure in Africa grew, it would face many of the challenges that other powers faced on the continent. Hu's trip highlighted several immediate threats to Chinese investments and citizens. Sudan poses a growing danger to regional stability as the conflict spreads to the Central African Republic and Chad, both the subject of visits by Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing earlier this year. This instability threatens China's large oil equity in Sudan. The Chinese have noted last month's stationing of U.S. military observers on the Sudan-Chad border and increasing talk of a potential "Plan B" if progress on resolving the conflict continues to stall.

Hu's visit to Zambia illustrated equally stark risks. Anti-Chinese riots occurred following the September 2006 elections in which the Chinese Ambassador threatened to sever relations if the opposition candidate, Michael Sata, won. Sata has seized on anti-China sentiment, including complaints of low wages, lack of basic safety standards, and Chinese workers taking local jobs. Although he lost the national elections to incumbent Levy Mwanawasa, his Patriotic Front party swept seats in key municipalities in the Copperbelt and Lusaka provinces and many of the urban constituencies in the Northern and Luapula provinces. Hu's itinerary in Zambia in February was curtailed due to anti-China demonstrations. Confined to Lusaka, he was forced to forego trips to a Chinese-run copper mine in Chambeshi and a stadium construction site in Ndola.

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peacekeeping, particularly in Africa.

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In West Africa, the recent kidnappings of Chinese nationals in Nigeria have shown China the perils of operating in the political minefield of the Niger Delta. Foreign workers, especially in the oil industry, have long been targets of armed militants protesting against environmental devastation and acute poverty in the Niger Delta, which pumps billions of dollars worth of oil each year. Gunmen in January stormed the government-owned Chinese National Petroleum Company office in the Nigerian state of Bayelsa and took nine Chinese employees hostage, releasing them just as Hu's visit began. In another incident in southern Nigeria's Rivers State last month, five Chinese telecommunication workers were kidnapped and returned within two weeks. Militants are capable of striking in cities, and violence over control of illegally acquired oil brought the Delta to the brink of all-out war last October. With Nigerian elections approaching, many fear the regrouping of the Niger Delta's militias and an escalation of violence.

It is unsurprising that China's historical wariness of international interventions has given way to growing support for UN peacekeeping, particularly in Africa. China has embarked recently on a step

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change in both its troop contributions and diplomatic support for new missions. It is now the 13th largest contributor of UN peacekeepers, providing 1,666 troops, police, and military observers to ten nations, mostly in African countries, including Congo, Liberia, and Sudan. During a Security Council mission to Addis Ababa in June of last year, China's UN Ambassador took the lead in supporting the deployment of peacekeepers to Somalia. This marked the first time that China has taken such leadership in promoting a foreign intervention in a country so far from home, as well as the first time in more than a decade that the Security Council has authorized intervention in Somalia. China has since entered negotiations to offer combat troops and a 1,000-strong deployment to Lebanon.

At the same time, Beijing is advocating for leadership positions within the UN secretariat and specialized agencies, in contrast with its traditional behind-the-scenes consensus-building approach. With the help of African votes, China led a successful campaign for leadership of the World Health Organization, resulting in the international echo of the Chinese government's latest domestic slogan when incumbent Margaret Chan pledged to build a "harmonious health world." China has also secured the top post in the UN's department of Economic and Social Affairs for its former ambassador to the UN's European headquarters.

Chinese officials are quietly dropping Deng Xiaoping's old mantra that it should never take the lead. With China exposed to so many global risks, a pragmatic foreign policy is no longer one in which freeloading on the West and no-strings relationships with reckless regimes are the most sustainable ways to pursue national interests or to build Chinese soft power. China is conscious of the danger of becoming an international pariah. It is conscious that extending unconditional support risks pushing such regimes to worse excesses. And it is conscious that active Chinese interventions are playing a consequential role in shaping outcomes.

China has an interest in being seen as a reliable partner for certain regimes and in the deals that may accrue from this perception. But it has a large number of other considerations to weigh in the balance. As Chinese power grows and its global interests expand, these considerations will multiply and the need to defend traditional self-protective norms of state sovereignty will assume diminishing importance.

### **Responsible Stake-holding Begins at Home**

While the rest of the world should welcome China's 'responsible stakeholder' overtures, there should be no illusions as to its limits. While the government has shown itself ready to act more responsibly on hot button issues that attract international condemnation and to take a more active stance in dealing with global security threats, its lack of domestic respect for human rights constrains the good that can come of this.

China is ill prepared to support rights and freedoms in Africa beyond those it provides to its own citizens. Its affinity to a number of the regimes and suspicion of the type of civil society organizations and critical media that are rare at home still tempts it toward support for autocratic best practice rather than good governance. China's growing global presence is also exporting some of its most dysfunctional domestic practices, including corruption, bad lending,

disregard for labor rights, and poor environmental standards. These practices seem set to expand further as Chinese FDI continues on the dramatic upward curve that may see it exceed inward investment to China as early as 2010.

Despite these concerns, the increasing temptation is to deal with China ever more exclusively on global strategic issues, shying away from its internal problems, a view reinforced by more forceful Chinese diplomatic efforts to remove these issues from the table. This is a mistake. The rest of the world's legitimate interest in China's domestic policy has never been higher. The limited and contingent attachment to international responsibility that China increasingly displays warrants some optimism, but it cannot substitute for real political reform inside China.

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