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China's New Dictatorship Diplomacy

Is Beijing Parting With Pariahs?

By Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt and Andrew Small

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Summary: Beijing has recently stepped back from its unconditional support for pariah states, such as Burma, North Korea, and Sudan. This means China may now be more likely to help the West manage the problems such states pose -- but only up to a point, because at heart China still favors nonintervention as a general policy.

STEPHANIE KLEINE-AHLBRANDT was International Affairs Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in 2006-7. ANDREW SMALL is a Program Associate at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

China is often accused of supporting a string of despots, nuclear proliferators, and genocidal regimes, shielding them from international pressure and thus reversing progress on human rights and humanitarian principles. But over the last two years, Beijing has been quietly overhauling its policies toward pariah states. It strongly denounced North Korea's nuclear test in October 2006 and took the lead, with the United States, in drafting a sweeping United Nations sanctions resolution against Pyongyang. Over the past year, it has voted to impose and then tighten sanctions on Iran, it has supported the deployment of a United Nations-African Union (UN-AU) force in Darfur, and it has condemned a brutal government crackdown in Burma (which the ruling junta renamed Myanmar in 1989). China is now willing to condition its diplomatic protection of pariah countries, forcing them to become more acceptable to the international community. And it is supporting -- in some cases even helping to create -- processes that chart a path to legitimacy for these states, such as the six-party talks on North Korea, thereby minimizing their exposure to coercive measures.

China's changing calculation of its economic and political interests has partly driven this shift. With its increased investments in pariah countries over the past decade, China has had to devise a more sophisticated approach to protecting its assets and its citizens abroad. It no longer sees providing uncritical and unconditional support to unpopular, and in some cases fragile, regimes as the most effective strategy. An even more important motivator has been the West's heightened expectations for China's global role. Faced with the 17th Party Congress last October, the Beijing Olympics in 2008, and presidential elections in Taiwan also later this year, Chinese officials would have preferred to think about avoiding trouble at home rather than about developing a new foreign policy. But the nuclear crises in North Korea and Iran and international outcry over developments in Darfur and Burma have forced their hand: Beijing has no choice but to worry about its international image. China's fears about a backlash and the potential damage to its strategic and economic relationships with the United States and Europe have prompted Beijing to put great effort into demonstrating that it is a responsible power.

Beijing's relationships with pariah states vary greatly, but the government is beginning to handle them more consistently. It would be premature to call this a new Chinese foreign policy doctrine, but a new Chinese foreign policy practice is emerging. With this change also comes a chance for greater cooperation with the United States. China's leverage over some difficult regimes, as well as the apparent willingness of Beijing's top leadership to use it, has already created the possibility of progress on a number of previously deadlocked issues, such as nuclear proliferation in Iran and political repression in Burma. And the debates in Beijing have moved on from how to defend the principle of noninterference to the conditions under which intervention is justified.

But there are important limitations. China has not undergone an underlying shift in values. Its economic interests remain paramount, and it still does not share Washington's views about human rights or democracy. The United States has its own track record of providing support to friendly autocracies, of course, but these regimes have been under no illusions about the United States' real preferences or about their vulnerability to changes in the calculation of *realpolitik*. With China, however, they have been able to establish relationships free from tensions or discomfort over issues such as democracy. Even when China presses pariah states toward (limited) political and economic reform, for example, it holds up its own experience to show that reform and economic opening need not lead to democracy. Respect for state sovereignty remains the bedrock of many of China's key alliances -- alliances that it cultivates not only because they are economically important but also because they are a hedge against a possible breach in its relations with the West.

The challenge for the United States and its allies will therefore be to make the most of China's shifting sense of its interests while realizing that China's broader policies toward authoritarian regimes do not align with their own. Beijing is not likely to

become a consistent partner of the West's in dealing with dictatorships, but it is becoming an increasingly important part of the solution in many problematic cases.

MARRIAGES OF FORTUNE

Within years of coming to power in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party instituted a foreign policy to promote "peaceful coexistence" that was based on five principles, including noninterference in the internal affairs of other states and respect for those states' territorial integrity and sovereignty. In practice, however, these principles were often subordinated to Cold War considerations and then also, in the 1960s and 1970s, to Mao Zedong's support for revolutionary insurgencies. Whereas North Korea was a client state of China's, in Burma, Beijing backed the Burmese Communist Party's insurgency against the military regime that seized power in 1962 (and whose successor rules today). China's support for revolutionary movements in Africa and the Middle East placed Beijing on the side of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe. But in Iran, principles did not prevent it from siding with the shah against the Soviet-aligned Tudeh Party, the main opposition force, for fear that Moscow might extend its influence in the Persian Gulf.

After 1978, Deng Xiaoping put Chinese policy on a new footing. His policy of "reform and opening" subordinated the revolutionary and anti-imperialist elements of China's foreign policy to the overriding imperative of economic development. Beijing suspended its support for Maoist insurgencies throughout the world, and its general approach to diplomacy became nonideological. Following the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, China feared the advent of a U.S.-dominated global order, and its relations with pariah states deepened -- after all, in those days it had veered toward pariah status itself. Still, Western policymakers' concerns about China's dealings were largely restricted to nuclear proliferation and arms sales. China's interest in economic growth and, increasingly, in rehabilitating its international reputation kept it from openly confronting the West. It rarely used its position on the UN Security Council to shield pariah states from international pressure. It compromised on proliferation issues. Unlike today, its economic and political support packages were no rival for Western development efforts. China's foreign policy in the 1990s basically followed Deng's so-called 24-character strategy: "Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership."

All this started to change in the late 1990s with China's extraordinary economic expansion and its corresponding need for energy and natural resources. China began to take advantage of its long-standing friendships with pariah regimes and the minimal competition in such countries from Western companies (whose activities there were limited by their governments, multilateral sanctions, or domestic pressure); it became one of the largest investors and trading partners of rogue states. At the instigation of some authoritarian governments eager to count Beijing as a sponsor, China sent its state-controlled companies to make massive investments, sweetening the deals with significant loans and military assistance. In 1996, with Western oil companies pulling out of Sudan, then a sponsor of terrorism, Chinese companies purchased a 40 percent majority share in the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company. (They have since increased their stakes in Sudan's oil sector, including with substantial investments in Darfur, and in recent years have bought as much as two-thirds of the country's oil exports.) Such activities intensified after Beijing announced a new "go out" strategy in 2001, which promoted Chinese investment in the developing world. In 2004, Iran, already one of China's primary suppliers of crude oil, agreed to sell to a Chinese corporation \$20 billion worth of natural gas per year for 25 years -- representing then the world's largest natural gas purchase. The discovery of a new gas field off the coast of Arakan, in Burma, that year set off feverish Chinese efforts to negotiate exploration rights. By 2007, China had become the largest trading partner of Iran, North Korea, and Sudan and the second-largest of Burma and Zimbabwe.

All these investments, in turn, altered China's sense of its national interest. In September 2004, Beijing threatened to veto UN resolutions imposing sanctions on Sudan. And as the Iranian nuclear crisis began to escalate in the summer of 2004, China suggested that it would be inappropriate for the Security Council to consider the matter. For good measure, it (along with Russia) invited Iran to be an observer at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which promotes military and security cooperation among six Asian states.

By late 2004 and early 2005, China's support for pariah regimes had taken a defensive -- even ideological -- turn. Beijing had grown anxious about the spread of "color revolutions" throughout the Caucasus and what it saw as the Bush administration's increasingly assertive democratization agenda. At the beginning of George W. Bush's second term -- as Washington criticized China's military buildup, pressed U.S. allies to restrict arms transfers to Beijing, tightened its ties with India and Japan, and upgraded its forces in the western Pacific -- Beijing worried that U.S. policy toward China was moving closer to containment.

During this period, China openly defended authoritarian governments that were under pressure from the West. North Korean leaders who had seen their relations with China cool under Chinese President Jiang Zemin suddenly found themselves being embraced by President Hu Jintao. In 2005, two weeks after Uzbek government troops killed dozens of protesters in Andijan, the Chinese government welcomed Uzbek President Islam Karimov with a 21-gun salute and praised his handling of the uprising. That July, at the height of international outrage over the Zimbabwean government's Operation Drive Out Trash -- a campaign to demolish the homes of hundreds of thousands of Zimbabweans living in opposition strongholds -- President Mugabe enjoyed a weeklong state visit to China. Meanwhile, Chinese diplomats in New York tried to block a Security Council discussion of a damning UN report on the Zimbabwean crisis. At about the same time, China also held its first joint military

exercises with Russia and supported a statement by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization demanding a timetable for the closure of U.S. military bases in Central Asia.

A RESPONSIBLE STAKEHOLDER

The United States decided to address these developments head-on in September 2005, when Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick called for China to become a "responsible stakeholder" in the international system. Zoellick warned Beijing that its ties with "troublesome" states would "have repercussions elsewhere" and that it had to choose whether "to be against us and perhaps others in the international system as well." But if China adopted a constructive global role, Zoellick said, the United States would welcome its rise, while still hedging in its relations with Beijing given "uncertainties about how China will use its power." The message, which came in the midst of a fevered debate in Beijing about the concept of China's "peaceful rise," was broadly reassuring. Beijing realized that its fears of a cascade of U.S.-instigated democratic revolutions across Eurasia had been misplaced, especially given the United States' weakening position in Iraq. By calling on China to become a "responsible stakeholder," Washington was only asking that it cooperate on formulating policies toward a small group of problem countries: potential nuclear weapons states, such as North Korea and Iran, and countries that were attracting broad international outrage, such as Sudan. Following President Hu's visit to Washington in April 2006, Beijing drew another conclusion: with the United States increasingly entangled in the Middle East, it had a growing need for China's help. Beijing might have seen this change as a burden, but the opportunity to secure a more cooperative U.S. stance on key Chinese priorities, including Taiwan, was unmistakable. At the very least, Chinese officials believed that working with the United States in this way would reduce the likelihood of confrontation and allow China to focus on challenges at home.

But China's initial foray into a new "dictatorship diplomacy" foundered, most notably with respect to North Korea. The Chinese government had helped convene the six-party talks in Beijing in 2003, but for some time it preferred to play the part of host rather than broker. It assumed an active role in drafting the joint statement of September 2005, in which North Korea agreed to abandon all nuclear weapons and nuclear weapons programs. But then China was unwilling to either tighten the screws on Pyongyang to ensure that it would live up to the deal or try to convince Washington to soften its hardening stance. On the one hand, Beijing supported U.S. bilateral financial sanctions: the Bank of China froze North Korean accounts. On the other, it continued to defend Pyongyang even after its missile test of July 2006. This approach was the worst of both worlds: it weakened Pyongyang's trust in Beijing and failed to persuade U.S. diplomats that Beijing was serious about restraining North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

The situation finally came to a head in October 2006, when, during the Chinese Communist Party's annual Central Committee plenum, Hu was informed with just 20 minutes' notice that North Korea was about to test a nuclear weapon. Beijing was quick to denounce Pyongyang's behavior as "brazen." It immediately cooperated with the United States on imposing sweeping UN sanctions and dispatched a Chinese official to warn North Korean leader Kim Jong Il about the consequences of further testing. Chinese analysts we interviewed in Beijing after both the July 2006 missile test and the October 2006 nuclear test said they believed that the leadership had learned its lesson. As one of them put it, "We used to treat this as a problem between North Korea and the U.S. We should have treated it as our problem."

The experience with North Korea left Chinese officials with mixed feelings: they were more confident of their diplomatic clout but doubted Pyongyang's willingness to disarm and regretted having squandered much of their leverage. Above all, they learned that fence-sitting can be more damaging than decisiveness. That growing realization seems to have informed China's policy toward Iran as early as the summer of 2006, even as Beijing was only starting to question its approach to North Korea. In July 2006, China decided to actively support the multilateral effort to confront Iran over its nuclear ambitions: it voted for UN Security Council Resolution 1696, which demanded the suspension of Iranian enrichment activities and threatened sanctions in case of noncompliance. It has since supported resolutions imposing and then tightening sanctions on Iran and backed a rare condemnatory statement from the Financial Action Task Force, the international standard setter on money laundering and counterterrorist finance issues. It also sent its foreign minister, as well as a special envoy, to Tehran to urge the Iranian government to stop enriching uranium.

Even more notable was China's recasting of its approach to Sudan. Whereas it had seen North Korea and Iran as posing traditional international security problems, China had long insisted that the massacres in Darfur were an internal matter. In April 2006, it had abstained from voting on a UN Security Council measure imposing targeted sanctions on four Sudanese government officials. But by the summer of 2006, the risks to Chinese interests on the ground had become much greater. A peace deal struck in May had unraveled, and the fighting in Darfur had escalated, spreading across the border into Chad, in whose nascent oil sector Beijing had just promised to invest. Amid growing public demands to halt the genocide in Darfur, talk of Western military intervention increased China's fears about instability there. And so in September, China urged the Sudanese government to accept a plan devised by then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, which provided for the deployment of a hybrid UN-AU peacekeeping force of 20,000 troops to Darfur. At a special UN Security Council meeting in November, the Chinese UN ambassador, Wang Guangya, made crucial interventions to secure the Sudanese government's agreement to the plan. Hu then raised the issue with Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir at the Chinese-African summit later that month and again during his own trip to Khartoum in early 2007. Describing the latter visit, Wang stated, "Usually China doesn't send messages, but this time they did."

Plans were already under way for Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Zhai Jun to visit Sudan when the nongovernmental campaign advocating a boycott of the so-called Genocide Olympics in Beijing began in early April. Soon afterward, Zhai toured refugee camps in Darfur -- a rare event for a high-ranking Chinese official. Within a week, Khartoum had agreed to the deployment of more than 3,000 UN troops, including 275 Chinese military engineers, to Darfur. With pressure still building, in May, China appointed Liu Guijin, a former Chinese ambassador to South Africa and Zimbabwe, as its first special envoy for African affairs. And on July 31, 2007 -- the last day of its Security Council presidency -- China supported the establishment of the 20,000-strong UN-AU force. Although the proposal had been considerably diluted, it did call for the cessation of aerial bombings by Sudanese government forces and mandated the protection of aid workers and civilians. Beijing privately demanded that the Sudanese government implement the resolution. The following day, Khartoum issued a statement promising that it would. The U.S. deputy secretary of state, John Negroponte, said that China had "played a pivotal role in brokering the agreement."

Beijing's recent handling of the situation in Sudan shows that it is learning the limitations of noninterference, however much that principle remains part of its official rhetoric. The concept may have been useful when China was relatively weak and trying to protect itself from foreign interference. But China has found noninterference increasingly unhelpful as it learns the perils of tacitly entrusting its business interests to repressive governments. This is the reason that Beijing has also recently scaled back its support for Mugabe's government, even in the absence of strong international pressure to do so. Chinese officials have complained that the economic situation in Zimbabwe -- where inflation is at 8,000 percent -- is "the worst" in the world and that Chinese deals with the Zimbabwean government over power stations, railways, and coal mining are a "headache." Multibillion-dollar projects announced with great fanfare have foundered. Harare has defaulted on Chinese loans. Hu skipped over Zimbabwe during a February 2007 trip during which he visited almost all of its neighbors. After publicly supporting Mugabe's brutal slum-clearance operation in 2005, Beijing remained icily silent during another opposition crackdown last year and intensified its efforts to cultivate ties with Mugabe's possible successors. Last September, the Chinese envoy Liu said that given the deteriorating situation, China would pare down its substantial development aid to Zimbabwe and limit itself to humanitarian assistance.

Beijing's rapidly growing support for UN peacekeeping operations is another example of its shift from pure noninterference to a more pragmatic foreign policy. China is now the second-largest supplier of personnel to UN missions among the permanent members of the Security Council (trailing France by 139 troops), and it has been discussing deploying Chinese combat troops with the UN for the first time. This both feeds into China's overall public diplomacy strategy and allows China to monitor and stabilize countries and regions where its economic interests are at stake, particularly in Africa. Beijing now contributes to seven of the UN's nine missions on the continent.

BOYZ N THE HOOD

A more stringent test of China's shifting stance, however, is how it behaves in its own backyard, where concerns about promoting stable borders and avoiding encirclement by U.S. allies feed far more actively into Beijing's calculus. Like North Korea and Sudan, Burma is both a strategically important client and an embarrassment for China. But Beijing has far more vested interests in Burma, a neighbor, close ally, and home to one million Chinese nationals. In addition to worrying about long-standing problems such as the drug trade, cross-border crime, and the potential spillover of ethnic insurgencies from Burma, Beijing is hoping to use Burma's ports and new transport links to India to develop China's poor and landlocked southwestern provinces. In an effort to facilitate the shipment of oil supplies from Africa and the Middle East while bypassing the energy-supply route that runs through the Strait of Malacca chokepoint, China is also planning the construction of a gas and oil pipeline from western Burma to Yunnan and Sichuan.

Nonetheless, China's patience with the Burmese junta has been wearing thin recently. For several years, Beijing encouraged it to undertake Chinese-style economic and political reforms in order to help the regime consolidate its rule, ensure stability, and regain international acceptability. It supported former Prime Minister Khin Nyunt, whom it considered a Deng-style reformist -- only to see him ousted in 2004. As the Burmese regime hardened further, China's confidence in the junta's capacity or willingness to reform faded. But Beijing moved from providing encouragement to exerting pressure on the regime only after its support for the regime was exposed in the UN Security Council. In mid-2006, the United States circulated a resolution in the Security Council demanding the release of political prisoners, condemning Burma's human rights practices, and calling for the establishment of a political process that would lead to a genuine democratic transition. China twice managed to prevent the measure from being considered, and when the United States and the United Kingdom finally brought it to a vote, last January, China vetoed it (as did Russia) -- the first time since 1973 that Beijing vetoed any matter unrelated to Taiwan. At the same time, however, Beijing called on the regime to "listen to the call of its own people . . . and speed up the process of dialogues and reforms."

Soon after, Beijing signaled to the junta that China's protection depended on its greater willingness to move forward with political reforms and take a less confrontational stance with the UN and other international institutions. Chinese State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan was sent to Burma last February to convey this message directly to Burma's leader, General Than Shwe. The Burmese government then signed a new agreement with the International Labor Organization, which it had been threatening to throw out of the country. A few months later, following the visit of acting Burmese Prime Minister Thein Sein to Beijing, the junta unexpectedly announced the resumption of the long-stalled national convention, which was supposed to

pave the way for a new constitution and elections. Even as China was pushing the regime to accommodate the demands of the country's minority ethnic groups, it started managing those relationships itself, for example, by convening in Kunming the leaders of various armed Burmese ethnic groups and pressing them to consider disarming. Chinese officials also intensified their efforts to reach out to the democratic opposition by hosting its representatives for meetings in China. And in July, they sponsored talks between the U.S. government and the Burmese government in Beijing.

But when the Burmese national convention failed to establish a credible political settlement and massive public protests broke out in Burma last fall following hikes in fuel prices, Beijing was forced to adapt its strategy. And so even while it was fending off multilateral sanctions against Burma at the UN, it supported a statement from the UN Security Council strongly deploring the junta's use of violence against peaceful demonstrators, acquiesced (uncharacteristically) to the passing of a condemnatory resolution in the UN Human Rights Council, and pushed the Burmese government to receive the UN special envoy Ibrahim Gambari and grant him access to senior generals and the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Throughout the demonstrations, the Chinese government urged restraint on the junta but made it clear that its first priority was to prevent another color revolution. However concerned it may be about tending to its international reputation, Beijing neither wants nor really can ask the Burmese regime to "commit suicide," as one Chinese analyst put it. Moreover, with the pipelines yet to be constructed and fierce interest from India in access to Burma's resources, the junta still has considerable economic leverage: three days after China vetoed the punitive Security Council resolution last January, the Burmese government granted a Chinese company a major oil and gas exploration contract, even though it had been outbid by an Indian competitor.

Ultimately, China's leaders acted largely in response to the threat to China's energy security and the potential loss of a closely allied neighboring government to what they saw as a pro-U.S. democracy movement. Rather than alienate the Burmese junta when it had its back to the wall, Beijing decided to act as its protector and then use the political capital thus gained to exert pressure on it once the situation had calmed down. If political change is going to come to a country of real strategic significance to China -- a Burma rather than a Zimbabwe -- Beijing wants to shape when and how that happens.

MONEY MATTERS

As China's dealings with Burma suggest, Beijing's new approach to pariah states is inherently limited. For one thing, China's shifting diplomacy reflects not a fundamental change in its values but a new perception of its national interests. Its main motivations remain energy security and economic growth, and Chinese leaders still swear by Deng's 24-character strategy. Beijing is not subordinating its economic aims to other goals; it is simply devising more sophisticated means to secure them. Thus, it should come as little surprise that China has avoided supporting tough penalties against Tehran and Khartoum or that even though it has removed Sudan from its list of countries with preferential trading status, few analysts in Beijing believe the move will substantially curb China's activities in that country. Hu's decision to chill ties with Zimbabwe last year was an economic calculation: any further investment there would yield little return while the economic crisis raged and Zimbabwe was defaulting on Chinese loans. And when it comes to countries on China's periphery, such as North Korea, Burma, or the Central Asian states, the prospects of regime change unleash deep anxieties in Beijing about being encircled by new democracies -- and about the United States' ultimate strategic intentions in welcoming democratization throughout the world.

In addition, the shift is not underpinned by the consensus in Beijing that would be necessary for a more comprehensive change in China's approach to pariah states. Beijing's moves have been piecemeal, with its top leaders debating in detail the merits of their every decision. China's old guard still opposes pressuring Sudan or imposing sanctions on Iran, for instance, in the name of developing-world solidarity. The hard-liners want to support pariah regimes in order to counterbalance U.S. power. Many Chinese arms and energy companies, and their powerful supporters in government, frequently oppose a more responsible Chinese foreign policy or try to circumvent the costly restrictions that come with it. And without an open civil society, a free press, or an independent judiciary in China, it is exceedingly difficult to hold the Chinese government, the Chinese military, or Chinese companies accountable for their actions.

The central leadership has made efforts to align key Chinese business interests with its new diplomacy. Most notably, in August 2006, it convened the Politburo, government ministers, Chinese ambassadors, provincial governors, party secretaries, officials from state-owned enterprises, and senior officials from the People's Liberation Army at the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference, the largest foreign policy gathering in China's recent history. Participants discussed how the behavior of Chinese companies abroad risked damaging the country's image, the need to establish a more coherent grand strategy, and how to strengthen China's soft power.

But these efforts have had little discernible effect on China's arms sales or the activities of Chinese energy companies in pariah states. Although China's record has undoubtedly improved with respect to sensitive nuclear and missile technologies over the last decade, Burma, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, and Zimbabwe continue to receive small arms and dual-use and conventional weapons technologies from economic and military actors in China. China has been the largest arms supplier to Sudan since 2004, for example; and in 2006 a UN panel of experts found that "shell casings collected from various sites in Darfur suggest that most ammunition currently used by parties to the conflict in Darfur is manufactured either in the Sudan or in China." The Chinese energy company CNOOC negotiated a \$16 billion investment in natural gas fields in Iran at a critical juncture in international negotiations over Tehran's nuclear program. Washington has repeatedly asked Beijing to restrain such economic activities in Iran and has punished Chinese companies attempting to transfer technologies that would support Iran's missile

programs. But even when the culprits are identified, China's opaque system makes it hard to determine whether these activities are instigated by companies operating outside the control of the central government, rogue elements in China's military and intelligence services, or decision-makers in Beijing.

WEIGHING IN

China will continue to set its own agenda, of course, but the United States and other concerned countries can play an important role in shaping its calculations. If other countries want China to become a more significant part of the solution in pariah states, they will have to start by developing both a realistic view of when and how China is likely to help and a clear sense of how their interests do (and do not) overlap with China's.

This will mean, in part, recognizing that cooperation with Beijing will sometimes come at a cost. It may require, for example, allowing distasteful regimes an extended lease on life or refraining from using coercive measures against them. China's ability to assume a greater role as a broker between pariah regimes and the international community means that it can define the bottom line in negotiations. In many instances, China will prefer to nudge these countries along, doing the minimum necessary to avoid acute instability or sustained international opprobrium.

The West is also likely to find itself struggling with these issues in new places: the economic calculations that have brought China to its influential position in so many pariah states are already being replicated in other countries. China is investing ever greater sums in resource-rich countries with autocratic governments and histories of instability: it has sunk \$3 billion into Angola since 2004, and last September it authorized a \$5 billion loan to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is also making substantial new investments in the energy sectors of Chad, Equatorial Guinea, and Turkmenistan, among others.

Still, even the limited political and economic reform that China is usually prepared to encourage is preferable to the status quo, and it could contain the seeds of serious change in the future. In a case such as Burma, where the United States and Europe have limited diplomatic and economic leverage, China is an indispensable player. Its military, economic, and political relationships with these countries are qualitatively different from the West's and provide it with unique influence over, as well as insight into, the intentions of their leaders. With respect to states such as North Korea and Sudan, where some of the West's options -- such as military intervention -- are highly undesirable, China's privileged relationship with the regimes has been crucial to improvements. And in cases where U.S. and Chinese interests overlap, say, regarding nuclear proliferation, cooperation would be advantageous for both Washington and Beijing. Beijing was instrumental, for example, in (finally) brokering a denuclearization plan with Pyongyang last February. Again, however, being realistic will be essential to making the most of Beijing's influence. With respect to Iran, for instance, China has largely decided to hide behind Russia on the diplomatic track. One crucial question will be the extent to which China is willing to cooperate with efforts to exert economic pressure on the Iranian government.

One important way to persuade China to cooperate will be to assuage its fears about the consequences of change in pariah states. Whether formally or through track-two channels, Washington should hold detailed discussions with Beijing to reduce its concerns about possible state collapse, political upheaval, or other major crises in Burma, North Korea, and Sudan. The outreach effort should not be restricted to official players: opposition groups and civil-society organizations from pariah states should seek out dialogue with Beijing, both to reassure Beijing about the implications of political transitions and to enlist its help in facilitating them. Meetings with Burmese opposition groups and officials from the Government of Southern Sudan have played an important role in helping to moderate the Chinese government's position with respect to both Burma and Sudan.

Of course, such moves will require firm support from Hu and the rest of China's top brass. Of all the parties involved, the Chinese Foreign Ministry is generally the most supportive of China's evolving dictatorship diplomacy, but it is rarely able to assert its position over the Ministry of Commerce or the military. To achieve real traction on the issue of pariah states, the United States and its allies need to maximize the effect of their calls for greater cooperation by consistently delivering them at the highest political levels in Beijing. Moreover, their requests need to be as specific as possible. Although there is much creative thinking taking place in Beijing about China's global role, the Chinese leadership remains reluctant to take the initiative, placing the onus on others to suggest new actions.

This strategy has already paid off. President Bush made a priority of raising the cases of Iran, North Korea, and Sudan during Hu's first presidential visit to Washington, in April 2006, and kept them on the U.S.-Chinese agenda in subsequent phone calls and bilateral meetings. The mechanisms for structured discussions established since 2005 -- talks on strategic issues at the deputy-secretary-of-state level, on regional issues at the assistant-secretary level, and on Iran among the five permanent members of the Security Council and Germany (the P-5 + 1), as well as regular visits of U.S. special envoys on Sudan and North Korea to Beijing -- have allowed Washington (and other Western countries) to express concerns about China's policy toward pariah states and permitted Beijing to take a greater part in joint decision-making regarding these countries. In the process, the United States and China have developed greater practice in strategic cooperation. It is difficult to imagine how the current degree of U.S.-Chinese coordination on Sudan could have been achieved without the experience of North Korea or the cooperation on Burma without both those precedents. As Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill put it, the six-party

talks on North Korea's nuclear program have "done more to bring the U.S. and China together than any other process that I am aware of."

At the same time as it seeks China's cooperation, however, Washington should be willing to pressure China when it is too lax on rogue regimes. Beijing is keen to avoid confrontation and does not want to lose control over such issues to decision-making structures in which it is not represented. In some circumstances, pressure will be most effective when it is applied indirectly or implicitly. It is considerably easier to convince China to act against pariah states when their neighbors and relevant regional organizations are already condemning them: the broader the criticism of a regime, the greater the pressure on Beijing to join in and the lesser its concern that by complying it will be seen as capitulating to U.S. or European demands. The AU's tough position on Sudan (it denied Khartoum the organization's chairmanship in 2007) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' growing exasperation with Burma (ASEAN strongly denounced the regime's crackdown in the fall) were critical factors in China's decision to shift its policy toward both countries. Conversely, the failure of the AU and the Southern African Development Community to condemn Mugabe last year reduced Beijing's incentives to get involved: by way of explaining Beijing's position, the special envoy Liu said, "We know that African countries, including South Africa, don't want to internationalize the issue of Zimbabwe."

Shifts in China's policy toward pariah states have been experimental, tentative, and incremental -- and are likely to remain so in the near future. But the strength of China's position with respect to many pariah states is a reality -- and an opportunity. Although there is little reason to believe that China is moving toward full alignment with Western policy, it may be prepared to distance itself from the worst autocracies and rogue states. Even if Beijing's list of such states is likely to remain short, it is bound to include a number of states that pose important security and humanitarian problems to the United States. In just two years, China has moved from outright obstructionism and a defensive insistence on solidarity with the developing world to an attempt to balance its material needs with its acknowledged responsibilities as a major power. And so when Washington and its allies formulate their policies toward pariah states, they should assume that China, although in some respects an obstacle, is now also a critical partner.

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