



**China: the company one keeps!** by Ralph A. Cossa

They say you can judge people by the company they keep. The same can be said about countries. So what does it say about China when its foreign minister, Li Zhaoxing, skips the annual ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) ministerial meeting to go visit Myanmar (Burma), at the same time that Chinese President Hu Jintao is welcoming Zimbabwe dictator Robert Mugabe to Beijing with full honors – the same Hu who responded to the carnage in Uzbekistan by inviting its president, Islam Karimov, to Beijing for a 21-gun salute in May, within two weeks of the Andijan massacre. The same China, one might add, that has systematically blocked stronger United Nations Security Council (UNSC) action against the genocidal government in Sudan and prevented the UNSC from discussing North Korea's flagrant violation of international nuclear and human rights norms. As one surveys the globe's pariah regimes, it seems the one thing they all have in common is the same best friend: China!

Foreign Minister Li's actions are particularly revealing. Unlike his counterparts from Washington, Tokyo, and New Delhi, Minister Li did show up in Vientiane for several ASEAN-related meetings, including China's one-on-one with the 10 ASEAN states and a gathering of the ASEAN Plus Three forum (also involving Japan and South Korea). His decision to skip the broader ARF meeting, which includes the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and other non-East Asian states, clearly signals China's preference for "Asia-for-Asians" forums, the ones that specifically exclude the United States. This continues the diminishing of the ARF begun when Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice decided to skip the Vientiane festivities entirely, sending her deputy, Robert Zoellick, in her place.

Earlier in the week, Myanmar had announced its decision to skip its turn as ASEAN (and ARF) chair next year so it could "focus its full attention on the ongoing national reconciliation and democratization process." ASEAN had been facing intense pressure from Washington and others to bypass Yangon (Rangoon) unless there was some significant movement toward political reform. Beijing had been arguing against this "interference in Myanmar's internal affairs." Going to Myanmar instead of the ARF demonstrates Beijing's solidarity with Yangon and its displeasure over ASEAN's and Washington's strong-arm tactics. It also underscores one of ASEAN's greatest concerns: that putting pressure on Myanmar drives it deeper into Beijing's camp. (It also appears evident that Myanmar has decided to "do the right thing" – give up its 2006 chairmanship – so that it can more easily avoid doing the really right thing: releasing Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest and seriously moving forward on democratization).

Meanwhile, China's intense courting of Uzbekistan – Hu made a reciprocal state visit to Tashkent in June – also has had immediate benefits. This past weekend Uzbekistan announced

that it was withdrawing its permission for U.S. troops to use its airbase at Karshi-Khanabad, mere weeks after the Chinese-organized Shanghai Cooperation Organization (involving Russia and four Central Asian states) had called on Washington to set a deadline for withdrawing from military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, despite the important role these bases play in pursuing the war on terrorism. (It's no wonder Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld made a quick trip to Bishkek last week to help ensure U.S. forces could continue to use Kyrgyz bases.)

It is much harder to come up with any rationale that would be sufficient to justify befriending Mugabe, whose gross violations of human rights have resulted in travel bans preventing him from traveling to Europe or the U.S. A recent UN report said Mugabe's controversial slum demolition campaign has been carried out in "an indiscriminate and unjustified manner, with indifference to human suffering"; UN Secretary General Kofi Annan called it a "catastrophic injustice" to the poor people of Zimbabwe. Beijing, on the other hand, expressed confidence in Mugabe's ability to handle this "internal affair."

I am not a China basher. I think cooperative, constructive relations between Washington and Beijing serve the national security interests of both nations and contribute significantly to regional stability, and that economic and (limited) political reform in China have helped to move the Middle Kingdom back into a position of prominence. China also deserves some credit for its constructive role in arranging the Six-Party Talks, aimed at resolving the nuclear standoff with North Korea.

But, even as Washington applauds growing cooperation with Beijing on issues such as Korean Peninsula denuclearization, currency revaluation, and a modest reduction in cross-Strait tensions with Taiwan, it cannot help but notice an increasingly active Chinese diplomatic campaign aimed at protecting, if not emboldening, some of the globe's most repressive regimes. One hopes that the first Sino-U.S. "Strategic Dialogue," which kicks off this week in Beijing between Deputy Secretary Zoellick and his Chinese counterparts, will take a candid look at the sour as well as the sweet aspects of Chinese diplomacy and how they impact the broader relationship.

In the meantime, those who seem quick to praise China's so-called "soft power" should take a closer look at the values and ideals Beijing seems intent on fostering and protecting. Before jumping on the China bandwagon, they may want to glance around and see who their fellow passengers are.

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