

Protecting Chinese citizens abroad: What next?

by Mathieu Duchâtel and Bates Gill

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The dramatic rise in overseas travel and expatriate work by Chinese was punctuated by the recent kidnappings of Chinese workers in Sudan and Egypt. “Overseas Chinese protection” (*haiwai gongmin baohu*) has been a critical priority since deadly attacks killed 14 Chinese workers in Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2004. Between 2006 and 2010, 6,000 Chinese citizens were evacuated to China from upheavals in the Solomon Islands, East Timor, Lebanon, Tonga, Chad, Thailand, Haiti and Kyrgyzstan.

But a new urgency has arisen in the past year: in 2011, China evacuated 48,000 citizens from Egypt, Libya, and Japan; 13 Chinese merchant sailors were murdered on the Mekong River in northern Thailand in October 2011; and in late January 2012, some 50 Chinese workers were kidnapped in two incidents by Sudanese rebels in South Kordofan Province and by Bedouin tribesmen in the north of Egypt's Sinai peninsula.

The worldwide presence of Chinese citizens — and the dependencies that generates — will only continue to grow: in 2012, more than 60 million Chinese people will travel abroad, a figure up sixfold from 2000, and likely to reach 100 million in 2020. More than 5 million Chinese nationals work abroad, a figure sure to increase significantly in the years ahead.

“Feeling for stones”

For now, China's approach to this challenge follows the time-honored and pragmatic Chinese maxim of “crossing the river by feeling for stones.” There is little alternative. The central government lacks an accurate figure of the number of overseas holders of a PRC passport. It is estimated to be 5.5 million in 2011, dramatically up from 3.5 million in 2005. State-owned enterprises are said to employ 300,000 Chinese workers abroad but there are no official statistics. Moreover, the coordination amongst the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), state-owned enterprises, and private businesses — problematic under most circumstances — has yet to be clarified regarding protecting citizens abroad, especially at a time when each of them are working separately to develop crisis management procedures.

The MFA is in charge of implementing consular protection. A Bureau of Consular Protection was created in May 2007 under the Department of Consular Affairs. Greater capacity will be a priority, as the Department only employs

140 diplomats in Beijing and about 600 abroad. The Ministry also plays an increasing role in prevention. It disseminates security information through a website (cs.mfa.gov.cn) launched in November 2011. It has also concluded an agreement with Chinese mobile phone operators to ensure that each Chinese national traveling abroad receives a text message with basic security information (including the contact of the Chinese Consulate and local police) upon arrival in a foreign country.

The Libyan operation is clearly a milestone in using the PLA to protect Chinese citizens abroad. The dispatch of a Jiangkai-II class frigate from the Gulf of Aden to the Libyan coast marked the first participation of the PLA Navy in a non-combatant evacuation operation. Similarly, the PLA Air Force deployment of four Il-76 transport aircraft to the south of Libya, to extract Chinese citizens, was unprecedented. Less noticed was the decisive involvement of Chinese military attachés from across Europe and the Middle East who were posted at key points of evacuation across the Libyan border to help coordinate the operation.

After the October Mekong murders, the MPS directly negotiated with Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos to reach the November 2011 agreement on joint river patrols. Although the MFA was involved in the negotiations, the fact that the MPS took the lead is in itself interesting — previously, the MPS's role in foreign policy was fairly limited — and part of a larger trend of foreign policy devolution on many issues away from the MFA.

State-owned enterprises and major private corporations have important responsibilities, and not only because they sometimes employ workers in dangerous spots. Their financial clout and strong organization potentially can be a major asset in the government's overseas protection strategy. For now, most lack standard operation procedures to prevent incidents and handle crises. Although some firms have risk assessment units, a chief security officer position has yet to be established in most of them. Some concerns have been raised about the deployment of poorly-trained private Chinese security forces by some Chinese companies abroad, echoing similar concerns raised about private security contractors elsewhere in the world. Some experts advocate government regulation to compel SOEs to adopt overseas security budgets proportionate to the risks, but this is a cost many companies are unwilling to bear.

Past practice suggests that coordination across these actors is not standardized and tends to result only after political decisions at the highest level. For individual cases of consular protection, the MFA is firmly in the driver seat. In cases of kidnappings, severe attacks and murders, it consults with the MPS. Larger evacuations require political endorsement from the Standing Committee of the Politburo and the Central

Military Commission. While State Councilor Dai Bingguo coordinated the Egypt operation, the scale of the operation in Libya required coordination at a higher level: a task force headed by Zhang Dejiang, Politburo member, Vice-Premier and head of the State Council Production Safety Commission.

Looking ahead: a change for China's foreign relations?

Looking ahead, do these developments mean big changes in Chinese foreign policy? Will Beijing further adjust its principles on sovereignty and non-intervention to take account for the safety of its citizens abroad? Will the challenge of protecting Chinese overseas lead to greater bilateral or multilateral cooperation with other major governments, such as in Europe or with the United States? Briefly put, there already are interesting changes underway, but as usual with Chinese foreign policies, these changes will likely unfold in a deliberate way and take time.

Beijing already seeks Western cooperation on these issues. For example, China relied heavily on cooperative relations with several European countries to carry out the Libyan operation. Allowing the transit through Greece of thousands of Chinese workers, some of them without a valid passport, was sensitive. In the Gulf of Aden, Western naval vessels escort Chinese merchant shipping (and Chinese escorts extend their protection to non-Chinese vessels when possible).

But additional cooperation is possible. Beijing has expressed an interest in exchanges with Europeans and Americans on evacuation operations and consular protection. The USA, France and the United Kingdom have a long record of non-combatant military evacuations, and major Western companies have developed sophisticated safety policies to operate in risky locales.

But for the near-term, it is more likely that China's priorities in this area — as in many aspects of Chinese foreign policy — will have Beijing looking inward, not outward. Setting up effective and standard procedures for protecting Chinese citizens overseas is to a great extent an institutional question regarding the distribution of costs and responsibilities between different government agencies, SOEs and private enterprises. Further institutionalization is very likely, given leadership commitment and strong public support for a foreign policy that delivers concrete benefits “on the ground” for Chinese nationals and enterprises.

Looking ahead, the question of protecting its citizens abroad will no doubt become more pressing and complicated for Beijing. It is an inevitable risk for a globalizing China, and one that it will be grappling with for a long time to come.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.