



China's Evolving Perspective on Darfur: Significance and Policy Implications by Chin-Hao Huang

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Recent developments indicate subtle, important adjustments in Chinese policy toward Darfur, including the announcement that it will deploy an additional 172-member engineering battalion to Darfur by mid-July, bringing China's contribution to a total of 315 troops in support of the United Nations-African Union hybrid peacekeeping force. Additionally, in a meeting between Chinese President Hu Jintao and Sudanese Vice President Ali Osman Mohammed Taha last month, Hu raised the issue and publicly pressed Sudan to "resolve the Darfur issue at an early date" and to comply with international commitments set forth by the UN and the AU.

Three important considerations can be gleaned from Beijing's diplomatic efforts on Sudan. First, Beijing realizes that it can ill-afford to ignore the pressure and influence wielded by U.S., African, and other international human rights advocacy groups and nongovernmental organizations. Persistent criticisms from these civil society organizations have placed intense pressure on the U.S. government to take decisive, punitive actions in response to the situation in Darfur, including calls for forced humanitarian intervention and labeling Beijing's narrow energy interest in Sudan as mercantilist and abetting genocide.

As Beijing seeks to burnish its global image and reputation, responding to these advocacy groups becomes an important factor in its foreign policy calculations. This has stirred a debate within the Chinese policymaking elite. Progressives argue that Sudan's oil assets are not worth pursuing in the long run (Chinese imports of Sudanese oil have declined in the last five years and Sudan accounts for 5-7 percent of China's total oil imports, less than 1 percent of China's total energy consumption), and have suggested scaling back relations with Khartoum. More hawkish voices argue that the United States – by dealing closely with such countries as Equatorial Guinea – is just as likely to embrace corrupt and unstable regimes.

Second, Chinese policymakers are beginning to realize that adhering to a formal policy of noninterference and putting it into consistent practice will be difficult and impractical. Beijing, however, will pursue this cautiously. Unless there is

overwhelming consensus to authorize humanitarian intervention in Darfur, both within the Security Council and the international community, the notion that Beijing would on its own deliver such a bold initiative is wishful thinking. It will, however, begin to amend its approach when it realizes that its core, national interests are at stake.

And third, Washington must move beyond the narrow focus on Beijing's inadequate pressures on Khartoum. There needs to be a more realistic understanding that the United States and China will continue to differ on assessments of the situation in Darfur and on the appropriate measures to pursue in its resolution. Washington should build on Beijing's accommodation and emerging openness to play a more responsible role in Darfur.

Where can we see these shifts in Chinese thinking about Sudan? At the onset of the Darfur crisis, China played a passive and sometimes obstructionist role in the Security Council. This attitude changed, however, with Chinese Ambassador to the UN Wang Guangya becoming very active, and was widely credited in gaining Sudanese acceptance of the hybrid peacekeeping mission in November 2006.

In March 2007, the National Development and Reform Commission, China's main economic planning agency, released a public document in conjunction with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce, noting that Sudan had been removed from the list of countries with preferred trade status. According to the announcement, Beijing will no longer provide financial incentives to Chinese companies to invest in Sudan. This move appears to be a signal of Chinese disaffection with Sudanese President Bashir's unwillingness to comply with international commitments.

Last April, Assistant Minister Zhai Jun visited Sudan to get a fuller understanding of political relations between Darfur and government leaders in Khartoum. Zhai was the first senior Chinese official to visit the internally displaced persons (IDP) camps and to meet a wide range of faction and military leaders as well as local refugees in Darfur. The visit allowed Beijing to engage in a dialogue with concerned parties and to get a clearer picture of the humanitarian situation in Darfur.

Shortly after Zhai's visit, Beijing announced the appointment of Ambassador Liu Guijin as special envoy to Africa. Liu, a seasoned diplomat, has made the Darfur issue a top priority. Liu visited Sudan several times since his appointment and conducted diplomatic consultations with concerned parties in Addis Ababa, Brussels, Paris, Pretoria, and Washington to help move the agenda forward in Darfur. Following Khartoum's acceptance of an expanded peacekeeping force in Darfur in June 2007, Liu reportedly stated that Beijing had been using "very direct language" as

well as its “own wisdom” to persuade Khartoum to accept the AU/UN hybrid force.

At the fourth round of the U.S.-China Senior Dialogue, Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte and Vice Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo covered a range of bilateral and global issues, including Darfur. A couple of constructive developments resulted from this meeting. First, the State Department’s statement at the end of the dialogue acknowledged the Chinese characterization of Darfur as a “humanitarian crisis” (as opposed to genocide). Second, the two sides agreed that various subdialogues, including on Africa, should continue to deepen mutual understanding and enhance collaboration in areas of common concern.

With Chinese soldiers on the ground in Darfur, recent killings and kidnappings of peacekeepers continue to alarm Beijing. It had insisted that a small number of force protection unit military personnel be included to help monitor peacekeeping activities in the region as well as to protect Chinese peacekeepers, but Sudan refused this request. Arduous negotiations between both sides followed, and in the end, armed Chinese combatant forces were not deployed. This friction has led Chinese negotiators to acknowledge in private that relations between China and Sudan are fraught with growing mistrust. Chinese officials are increasingly concerned with the safety of their nationals in Sudan; Beijing appears more concerned about the deteriorating situation on the ground and will be prepared to take a more accommodating stance in pressing forward with a more robust and effective deployment of the hybrid peacekeeping force and urging the parties to reconcile and engage in serious political dialogue.

It appears that there is greater consensus on hot spots in Africa such as Darfur, in part because there is growing congruence in Beijing’s evolving perspective and Washington’s outlook. To be sure, China will be cautious and will not act solely to please the international community. It will not overtly undermine its policy of “noninterference” and respect for sovereignty, even with Sudan. But, Beijing will begin to amend its approach as it recognizes a growing interest to do so, especially when it comes to ensuring stability in countries and regions important to China’s domestic development; enhancing its global activism and prestige; and protecting China’s human capital abroad, including entrepreneurs, civilian’s, and military personnel.

The emerging trend is encouraging; the challenge is for Washington to elevate Darfur in the U.S.-China agenda and to make a stronger commitment to sustain the momentum at a high diplomatic level to understand the subtleties behind China’s evolving perspective, continue to test Chinese intentions systematically, work with China in a broader coalition to press Sudan to accept negotiated compromises, and enlarge Beijing’s commitments to play a more active and constructive role in Darfur.

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