Challenges for a "Responsible Power"

By Sophie Richardson

In 2007, China's harsher critics across the world pointed with alarm to its growing international presence, highlighting what they describe as its preference for doing business with abusive and autocratic governments like itself, its export of tainted toys and medicines, and its rapacious quest for energy resources across the defenseless developing world. Chinese officials paint a very different picture, describing their foreign policy as a "process of forging [China's] destiny with the international community in a closer and more genuine way," insisting it is a "responsible power," and suggesting that such relentless criticism violates the rights of China's 1.3 billion citizens.

One thing is certain: as China becomes ever more enmeshed in the international system, its foreign policy is changing in small ways and is under more scrutiny than ever. As the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games approach, which Chinese officials consider a unique opportunity to show off a modern China to the world, the leadership may be more willing to factor human rights considerations into its decisions. Successfully encouraging it to be more open to human rights promotion, however, will require understanding several key dimensions of Chinese foreign policy and what they mean for human rights globally.

Human rights activists expect all governments to uphold internationally recognized human rights obligations, regardless of borders. But China's approach is one of non-interference, respect for sovereignty, unconditional development aid, refusal to base international relations on regime type or commitments to reform, and resistance to international scrutiny of domestic affairs. This leads to some key questions: how does the Chinese government's approach harm international human rights promotion? In particular, will China's policies of non-interference and unconditional aid obstruct crucial traditional human rights instruments and institutions, such as UN Security Council-imposed pressure and sanctions? Is there a particular logic to

Chinese foreign policy? Has recent international pressure prompted the Chinese government to respond more constructively in the face of human rights crises, such as in Darfur and Burma? And, ultimately, can a government that assiduously represses rights at home be expected to work for their defense elsewhere?

How Chinese Foreign Policy Undermines International Human Rights Protection

Few bother to note that it is a tenet of Chinese foreign policy to have relations with and provide aid (a considerable amount of it for a developing country) to rights-respecting governments on the same basis as it provides aid to abusive ones. This is a reflection of China's core policy of "non-interference" in the internal affairs of other states. As a growing power, China's close relations with abusive governments come in for great criticism, as they should, but there is little evidence in recent years that the Chinese government actively encourages human rights abuse by others. China's willingness to provide aid and political support regardless of a recipient's human rights record may, depending on the situation, deserve criticism, but no more so than other countries that do the same thing.

Yet there are many ways in which the model and practice of Chinese foreign policy crucially undermines international efforts to defend human rights. First, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) model of development—rapid economic growth without a commensurate increase in civil or political rights, alongside general resistance to international pressure—is hardly a positive example. Economic development in China has brought a greater degree of social freedoms, and of course reduced the number of people in poverty, but the fact remains that it is a government highly repressive of its critics, often on the grounds that their criticism jeopardizes state stability and growth. In addition, that rapid growth has been enabled by gross violations of labor rights, rampant expropriation of land and other public resources by officials, environmental devastation, and suppression of public discontent about these developments. In this sense, the Chinese "model" is, needless to say, not one rights activists wish to see replicated.

Second, after regaining United Nations membership in 1971 and spending about 20 years reinvigorating China's international diplomacy, Chinese diplomats have

become more adept at undermining or obstructing the work of international institutions important to the promotion of human rights. For example, Chinese officials consistently block UN Security Council resolutions that entail sanctions, such as (along with other countries) a proposed resolution in January 2007 on Burma and a later resolution condemning the Burmese junta's September 2007 assault on thousands of peaceful demonstrators. By obstructing a means of swiftly disciplining an abusive government or impeding investigations into the nature and scope of human rights abuses, such actions directly contribute to the misery of those who are already suffering.

China's actions at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) also demonstrate a concerted effort to roll back structures and procedures for protecting rights. China was one of several countries to propose that country mandates and "special procedures" be abandoned or restricted. It suggested that only governments should be able to submit statements in the universal periodic review (UPR) process. Chinese diplomats have complained that nongovernmental organizations' involvement in the HRC should be "controlled." In 2006, China objected to the HRC accepting a report on human rights conditions in Darfur on the grounds that the authors had not actually been inside the country and therefore its report could not be accurate. That entry into the country had been denied by precisely the people thought to be responsible for human rights abuses (and precisely in order to evade scrutiny) seemed immaterial to China.

Third, while Beijing may have deep philosophical differences with the rest of the international community on the efficacy of conditioning aid, it has indisputably provided a crucial financial lifeline to countries with poor human rights records. This has often undermined efforts made by other international actors to use financial pressure to improve rights. Without steady flows of Chinese aid, investment, weapons, and political support, it is possible that the governments of Burma's General Than Shwe, Sudan's President Omar Bashir, and Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe, among others, would either already have been consigned to history or would have had their ability to abuse their citizens dramatically limited by a lack of resources.

It is these kinds of actions that earn the Chinese government its reputation as the patron of abusive regimes. Beijing defends its decisions to maintain these relationships with three arguments: first, that to alter them would be to discriminate on the basis of "internal affairs," which it insists it will not do; second, that withdrawing such support would only worsen at least the economic situation of the countries in question, particularly for ordinary people; third, that developed countries at various points continue to support equally abusive governments when it suits them, and thus China's approach cannot be criticized. That these arguments find sympathy in some quarters around the world does nothing to relieve China of complicity in the human suffering that results from its relations with abusive governments.

The Logic Behind Chinese Foreign Policy

Many assume that Chinese diplomats simply do not care about the human rights of other people. After all, they argue, the Chinese government does not care about the rights of its own citizens. Its leaden rhetoric about international human rights and non-interference often sounds callous and seems to eschew any sympathy or responsibility for victims. But those who make assumptions about China's global agenda—that it only supports dictatorships or communists, that its aid brings no benefits to ordinary people, that it seeks to dominate its region—do so at their own peril, as they ignore much evidence to the contrary. More important, these arguments fail to apprehend the internal logic and thinking of Chinese leaders about their international role and aspirations.

China's leaders often point to their efforts to lift hundreds of millions of Chinese out of poverty as evidence of their commitment to human rights domestically. Rather than seeing all rights as equally important, the CCP continues to argue that economic and social rights, which it often equates with economic development, take precedence over civil and political rights. Poverty, they argue, causes serious instability and makes it impossible for any rights to be secured. Even assuming that poverty reduction is their overarching priority, the logic of Chinese officials is flawed. Respect for civil and political rights can also assist poverty reduction efforts, but one does not hear Chinese officials arguing that China must immediately remove barriers to free expression and the free flow of information so as to free up space for more robust public criticism of bad governance and policy failures. This failure to

acknowledge the importance of such civil and political rights, it is worth noting, has created a domestic threat to the CCP more serious than it has grappled with in decades as unprecedented numbers of Chinese protestors and petitioners spill into China's streets to make their complaints known.

China's foreign policy employs a similar logic—that economic development is key to real independence and therefore also to securing individual countries' "rights" in the international community. This thinking is augmented by several other closely-held beliefs, including a half-century of hostility towards the principles and practices of American foreign policy, which China continues to see as profoundly imperialistic, hypocritical, and, directly or indirectly, the cause of conflict. Beijing also remains skeptical about the merits of international institutions and norms, many of which were developed in the two decades during which China was frozen out of the international system, and which the CCP believes were created in part to criticize, take advantage of, and marginalize developing countries. As long as the United States remains committed to defending Taiwan, the CCP also believes it remains vulnerable to actual threats to its territorial security. Finally, by forgoing its claim to examine other countries' human rights conditions, it is much easier for Beijing to reject scrutiny of its own.

These convictions and rhetoric often sound and are obstructionist, particularly when deployed in the face of gross human rights abuses. Yet they remain popular in many parts of the developing world, where China is now seen as almost as desirable a partner as the United States, the European Union, and international financial institutions.

The term "non-interference" seems to contradict other Chinese foreign policy rhetoric, which regularly states the importance of China's membership in the international community. But many Chinese officials genuinely do not believe that pressing countries to adopt rights-respecting political or economic systems, or selecting aid recipients based on their human rights records, let alone deposing a particular political leader, achieves progress. To many Chinese leaders, non-interference does not mean uninvolved or uninterested, but rather conducting international relations in a highly circumscribed way so as not to alter the domestic balance of power or induce significant

change other than that which local authorities want; it also means reducing the role of international organizations to talk shops for deferential governments, not activist bodies.

Whether local leaders are human rights heroes or war criminals, and regardless of how they came to power or what sort of system they run, China believes it is best to leave crucial decisions about human rights policies to domestic politics. This is the opposite of the approach the United States, European Union, UN, and others often adopt (though with glaring exceptions and highly inconsistent emphases). Many Chinese foreign policy officials, however, view any intervention as distorting domestic politics and relieving domestic actors of responsibility for their actions, ultimately making those countries less independent and stable.

China's insistence on sovereignty also seems in tension with its own rapidly growing interconnections with the rest of the world. But one has to bear in mind Chinese leaders' obsession with maintaining control of Tibet and Hong Kong, and gaining control of Taiwan. These goals are inextricably linked to the CCP's lore about its own legitimacy: that it came to power and has stayed in power because it has popular support, and no foreigners have the right or even the information needed to make good decisions about what happens inside China. Similarly, in the international arena Chinese leaders view conditioned aid and pressure for major economic or political change as undermining sovereignty by leaving too many important decisions to foreigners. Those leaders also believe that international interventions are likely to fail because the people pushing for intervention often lack an adequate understanding of on-the-ground reality or a sufficient commitment to remain involved long enough, or are actually using human rights as a Trojan horse for hidden political agendas.

Are Things Changing?

As it has increasingly come under the international spotlight for its foreign policy positions, China has recently made modest policy adjustments that appear to promote human rights. It is too soon to tell whether they constitute a shift away from the traditional policy of non-interference, or whether they are idiosyncratic changes made in response to intense international pressure.

One sign of change is that, in response to considerable international pressure, China has taken some steps to respond to the human rights crisis in Sudan. China has been harshly criticized for not making better use of its leverage as the primary purchaser of Sudanese oil to discipline a government that is almost certainly guilty of—at a minimum—crimes against humanity. From 2004 to 2006, China helped shield Sudan from the threat of individual and other types of sanctions at the Security Council. It provided diplomatic support to Sudan's refusal of a UN deployment in Darfur, for instance, by abstaining on resolution 1706 in August 2006, which authorized such a force.

Yet just months later, in November 2006, Chinese diplomats apparently took a more assertive position at a key meeting to discuss Darfur deployment in Addis Ababa. In March 2007 China removed Sudan from a list of countries in which Chinese investors were encouraged to do business. In May, Beijing took the highly unusual step of appointing a special envoy for Africa with a focus on Darfur, tapping veteran diplomat Liu Guijin. In August China supported resolution 1769 at the Security Council, which authorized the deployment of a hybrid UN-African Union peacekeeping force. In October, it sent 300 engineers to join the peacekeeping operation.

What changed? China says that it was quietly pushing Sudan all along to resolve the Darfur crisis. But the Chinese government clearly was deeply dismayed over the international focus on its role—which was concentrated, in the words of one Chinese diplomat, "in a way we have never before experienced"—and efforts to link the abuses in Sudan to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. As a result, it decided to intervene more actively with Khartoum, and to be more visible in doing so. The Chinese government made more public statements explaining how it was trying to convince the Sudanese government to accept international demands. The tone and timing of Chinese statements and actions also suggest growing concern in Beijing that ongoing instability in southern Sudan would jeopardize China's plans for oil development across the country. There is, of course, a great deal more China should push Khartoum to do: rapidly deploy the hybrid force, ensuring that it is fully equipped with a robust protective mandate; surrender the ICC indictees; end rape and "ethnic cleansing"; and create conditions for voluntary safe return of the displaced. These actions will have far more of an impact than a special ambassador ever will.

News also began to trickle out in June 2007 of an "unprecedented" effort by Chinese diplomats to bring together leaders of Burma's exile government with members of the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Since the Burmese military government solidified its grip on power after annulling elections in 1990, it has been increasingly isolated by Western sanctions. Yet China has provided a crucial financial and diplomatic lifeline even in the face of attacks on peaceful democratic opponents, continued brutal assaults on ethnic minorities, the systematic use of rape as a weapon of war, and ongoing recruitment of child soldiers. After the government used force to break up street protests led by monks in September 2007, China publicly called for restraint and dialogue on all sides and agreed to a Security Council statement critical of the government. It gained credit for quietly pressuring the Burmese government to allow a special UN envoy access to opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and for supporting the "good offices" of the UN secretary-general. However, China failed to halt arms transfers or publicly challenge the SPDC over the killing and arrest of protestors.

This relative assertiveness is far more likely a function of China's desire not to have a large border state deteriorate into chaos than a shift in loyalties—although China has long had a relationship with the SPDC, it had no trouble congratulating the pro-democracy forces for their electoral victory in 1990. If Burma implodes, not only would China's considerable investments there be compromised, but so would its ability to manage a border area already rife with drug trafficking and serious public health crises. Of course, should China want to work for a truly stable Burma, it should recognize that the source of instability in Burma is a deeply unpopular, repressive, and rapacious military government that has done almost nothing to address the economic needs of its own people. So long as it stays in power, the country is likely to remain unstable.

Another interesting development came in late August 2007, when a senior British diplomat suggested that China was taking a harder line against Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe through a highly unusual reduction in aid. After a flurry of articles in the international press, China vehemently denied that the total amount of its aid would be reduced. It later emerged that the amount going to economic programs China had deemed unsuccessful was being cut, while commensurate

increases were being made in humanitarian aid. It is unclear why the change was made—whether it was a political message or a more technical decision relating to the efficacy of the use of development aid by Mugabe's government—and therefore whether it signaled a new willingness to use aid to press a recipient government to change its policies. But it is a noteworthy episode that should be further explored.

In international fora, China has been a marginally more cooperative player recently. It is increasingly inclined to abstain on, rather than veto, some international initiatives with which it is uncomfortable, such as the Security Council's referral of Darfur to the International Criminal Court or the Asia-Europe Meeting's communique harshly criticizing the Burmese junta. China is contributing larger numbers of troops to international peacekeeping efforts, including 1,000 to efforts in Lebanon, which shows a growing level of comfort with such initiatives.

What China Can Do Differently

Senior Chinese foreign policy makers' core beliefs remain largely unchanged, and it will be at least another decade until younger, more progressive diplomats come to the fore. Consequently, it is unlikely that China will significantly change its approach in the near future and embrace some of the practices most relied upon by other influential governments: international scrutiny, political pressure on abusive governments, sanctions, conditioned aid.

Yet there are some steps China can take that are consistent with its current world view which will help victims of human rights abuses. At a minimum, Beijing should reconsider its aid strategies. It is highly unlikely that China will begin "attaching strings," but it can at least suspend gratuitously inappropriate projects, such as the new presidential palace for Sudanese President Omar Bashir, and reallocate those funds to other projects that would help those most in need. In the direst circumstances, such as the crackdown in Burma in September 2007, it should suspend some aid to send a political signal. Should it fail to do so, the Chinese government must recognize that its actions will give others legitimate grounds to criticize its agenda and question its motives. Simply being more transparent about aid, particularly in countries with serious human rights issues, would also be a significant improvement.

China could also articulate the conditions under which it will set aside its insistence on sovereignty and non-interference, particularly with respect to human rights crises. Some argue persuasively that by ratifying legally binding international human rights treaties China's obligations are clear.[1] When in 2005 it signed up to the "responsibility to protect" at the UN, China agreed that member states are obliged to intervene when a government fails to protect its own population against serious human rights abuses. It is not yet clear under what circumstances China will endorse the doctrine's use—if it is serious, the discussion in China (and elsewhere) should move from *whether* to treat state sovereignty as an impregnable boundary to *how* it will join with other countries to intervene in the most egregious humanitarian crises when circumstances require. In order for the responsibility to protect to be implemented, the capacity to prevent and respond to mass atrocities must be created, both within countries and at the international level. For example, the UN secretary-general should have the ability to deploy human rights monitors if alerted to a developing situation which implicates the doctrine, and the UN should have a standby force ready to deploy immediately when mass atrocities loom. Chinese support for such measures would indicate true international responsibility.

Finally, China should be truer to its own rhetoric that it is a devoted friend of the developing world. It should see its foreign policy as not just about relations with other governments, but also about helping to improve the well-being of the people of those states. This would earn China the gratitude of people around the globe. But it will require a policy that accepts that human beings need civil and political rights as well as economic development. If it wants to be seen as a responsible power, China should be willing to act decisively when people suffer at the hands of their own governments. Putting human dignity at the core of Chinese foreign policy would indeed constitute revolutionary change for China and the rest of the world.

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[1] As a member of the United Nations, China is expected to uphold the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), but it is also a party to the Convention Against Torture (CAT), the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural (ICESCR) Rights. It has signed but not ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).