



China tries to solve a dilemma in Sudan

Socialization processes in China's foreign policy?

by Morten Steinvig, cand.mag.,
Research assistant attached to Institute for Strategy

Research Paper



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Abstract

Hvorfor har Kina ændret sin politik i forhold til Sudan, presset en vigtig handelspartner og brudt med dogmet om ikke-indblanding i interne affærer? Disse ændringer repræsenterer et skred i forhold til traditionelle kinesiske udenrigspolitiske normer om suveræn lighed og en drejning væk fra den måde, Kina normalt engagerer sig i Afrika på. Dette research paper argumenterer for, at disse ændringer primært skyldes socialisering. Selvom beslutningstagerne i Beijing ikke er blevet overtalt til at adoptere nye normer, har de prøvet at efterligne en vestligt konstrueret rolleidentitet som en ansvarlig partshaver i internationale forhold. Dette er et forsøg på at maksimere social status og respekt internationalt. Denne efterligning er en del af, og medvirker til at styrke, en videre tendens, hvor traditionelle kinesiske udenrigspolitiske normer, identiteter og adfærdsmønstre er under genfortolkning.

Introduction

"Non-intervention is our brand, like intervention is the American's brand."
Zhou Yuxiao, a Chinese diplomat, quoted in Kurlantzick 2007

In the not so distant past, China's influence was largely confined to its immediate neighbourhood in Asia. Now its influence on global affairs is growing at a seemingly exponential rate. Beijing's actions in safeguarding its economic and political interests, as well as its attempts to play by its own rules and norms, are increasingly affecting the interests of Western governments and certain normative standards of human rights, democracy, good governance and humanitarian intervention, whether China intends this or not. These two issues are present and have become conflated in China's involvement in Africa in general, and in Sudan in particular.

China's close and unconditional relationship with 'pariah' states like Sudan has raised concerns in the West. This relationship signals the emergence of new dynamics in an already complicated region. It is a relationship based on a soft-power framework in which China takes a laissez-faire attitude towards domestic issues, which may seem at odds with the official Western agenda for partnerships with African countries. It is interesting to observe how China responds to international concerns about its relationship with these states, since it may tell us something about which trajectory China might take as an actor in Africa or perhaps even as a great power. This response will be analysed in this paper by attempting to illustrate a potentially crucial process in international relations, namely the 'causal link' between norms, identities and changes in the behaviour of states, in other words, socialization. This is a key concept of constructivism, which uses sociology to offer insights into the social construction and context of international relations. The explanatory power of social identities, kinship affiliation and the appropriateness of norms are important if one aims to understand and explain the motives and behaviour of agents. Constructivism asks questions such as why and how do states (by which constructivists actually mean decision-makers) change preferences, interests and hence behaviour? This focus on social processes, changes and the influence of norms sets constructivism apart from other theories of international relations, such as realism or liberalism, which sees the preferences of agents as static and based on material incentives and geography.

This research paper takes its point of departure in the argument that there exists an inherent dilemma in China's Africa policy. This stems from China's double identity as a developing country and a great power. In the context of its involvement in Africa, this schism is causing a political tension between the soft-power framework that is giving China a political and economic comparative advantage in Africa vis-à-vis traditional actors, and the image China wants

to project globally, and especially towards the West, as a responsible, constructive and civilized great power. This is a dilemma which is crystallised in the case of Sudan and the Darfur conflict, which since 2004 has become a hot spot for international attention and a recurrent point of criticism of China because of its support of the government in Khartoum. China's solution to this dilemma in the case of Sudan seems to be a policy change away from non-interference, which is an intricate part of its framework of engagement and a founding principle of Chinese foreign policy. An important question thus arises, namely how may the solution of Chinese decision-makers to the suggested dilemma be understood? Are these changes based on calculations of material costs and benefits, or are they expressions of a kind of socialization? This paper will attempt to answer these questions.

In the following part, it will be shown that there has been an unmistakable change in the way Chinese officials talk about the Darfur crisis and how they deal with the regime in Khartoum. While this cannot be defined as a Chinese *kowtow* to norms of human rights and humanitarian intervention, it signifies an attempt to meet international demands on China for it to wield its influence in Khartoum and actively help solve the crisis. This may be interpreted as the effect of socialization.

This paper therefore analyses, weighs and discusses the possible motives and preferences behind China's policies towards Sudan. It argues that the social costs involved in a continued line of policy clearly outweigh the material costs. The paper then puts forward the argument that the Chinese solution to the Sudanese dilemma between identities, economic pursuits and social acceptance is motivated by an attempt to live up to certain role expectations – one is tempted to say 'standard of civilisation'. In the case of Sudan, Chinese foreign policy-makers have been trying to maximise their status in the eyes of both Western and African leaders by mimicking the Western construction of a responsible stakeholder. The foreign policy-makers in Beijing have not been persuaded to internalise any new norms, but they have bent the norm of non-interference and their *laissez-faire* policy in order to gain social recognition.

The last part of the paper discusses the wider implications of its findings and shows how these may tell us something about how China is learning to cope with its rise within the context of international integration and normative pressure. The argument is put forward that Chinese policy-makers are learning the limits of sovereignty, and that they are becoming increasingly sensitive and to some extent also responsive to international calls for China's active participation and responsible stakeholdership in international affairs. China's changing status and rise in the international system and community provokes responses from governments and other agents. China is learning new causal connections between status and a bestowed role, leading to a gradual reinterpretation of its traditional policy principles.

China in the Darfur Conflict

"Business is business. We try to separate politics from business... the internal situation in the Sudan is an internal affair."

Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Zhou Wenzhong
quoted in The New York Times, August 22, 2005

The international social environment of the Darfur crisis

When the full extent of the Sudanese government's military campaign in the province of Darfur came to light in 2004, Western states sought action against Sudan in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). However, these efforts were hampered by opposition led by China. The Western hardliners, led by the USA, UK and France, as well as the international media and NGOs, took a critical stance towards Khartoum (and China). They made their case with reference to the Responsibility to Protect¹ discourse, which implies that the international community has the right and obligation to put the primacy of sovereignty aside when a state fails to protect its own citizens. In the UNSC, Western states constantly threatened measures such as unilateral sanctions and invoking the Chapter VII provision, which allows the UNSC to take military and non-military action to restore international peace and security.

The soft-liners, led by China, endorsed the norm of sovereign equality and non-interference and emphasised dialogue before confrontation. These positions were supported by the League of Arab States (LAS), Russia and initially also by most African Union (AU) members.² In time, though, Beijing began changing its tune towards Khartoum as the crisis worsened, international pressure rose, and China began to be seen as part of the problem.

China changes its response to Darfur

After mid-2006 there was a clear shift in how China dealt with Sudan as well as the rest of the world on the Darfur issue. While officially China continued the same policies of non-intervention and opposed sanctions, starting from the end of 2006 it became increasingly willing to wield its influence in Khartoum. Beijing shifted its position from a hands-off approach to one of active engagement and mediation by attempting to convince the regime in Khartoum to cooperate with the international community.³ While China has continued its close cooperation with Khartoum, its firmly held foreign-policy norm of non-interference in the in-

(1) S/RES 1678

(2) Bellamy 2005: 51. For further examples concerning these changes in official positions on this issue through time, see United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1547, 1556, 1564, 1574, 1585, 1590, 1591, 1593, 1627, 1651, 1663, 1665, 1672, 1706, 1709, 1713, 1714, 1755, 1769, 1779, 1784 and 1812.

(3) Associated Press: November 2, 2006, Washington Post: February 3, 2007, Bloomberg: February 6, 2007

ternal affairs of Sudan has been compromised in practice by its active diplomatic efforts.

From January 2004 to July 2008, Chinese diplomats consistently referred to their country's respect for Sudan's territorial integrity and sovereignty⁴ as reasons for opposing resolutions referring to norms of interference such as the Responsibility to Protect. '*China has a long tradition of friendly relations with Sudan,*' stated Wang Guangya, China's ambassador to the UN in 2004.⁵ But since then China has increasingly begun to mimic Western diplomatic language concerning Darfur⁶ and has thus changed part of its discursive practice through this timeframe. Statements such as *business is business*' have become unthinkable for Chinese officials, who now explicitly distance themselves from Khartoum's activities. This was illustrated by special envoy Liu Guijin's statement in January 2008 that "*the Chinese government has never supported the Sudanese government conducting any massacre of its people*"⁷ during a visit to Khartoum. For the first time a Chinese official hinted at the responsibility of al-Bashir's government. And later Liu reportedly gave Sudan's Foreign Minister, Deng Alor, the blunt message that "*the world is running out of patience with what is going on in Darfur*" and urged Sudan not to take actions that would "*cause the international community to impose sanctions on them*"⁸. Such statements have been followed by visits to refugee camps, rare moves for Chinese officials.⁹

From February 2004 to June 2008, 23 UNSC resolutions addressing Sudan were adopted. China abstained from voting on six of these, all of which were connected to Darfur and all critical of Khartoum. In the UNSC China consistently used its position to ward off international pressure by obstructing international punitive measures and humanitarian action in the name of territorial integrity and sovereignty. Beijing publicly defended Khartoum's efforts by threatening to use its veto and by continuing to insist that political and economic pressure and sanctions would be counter-productive.

But since its acceptance of (watered down) Chapter VII provisions in resolution 1706 of August 2006, China has attempted to avoid being seen as an obstacle by the West and to be regarded instead as part of the solution. Since August 2006 China has persistently presented itself publicly as playing a "*constructive role*" on the Darfur question.¹⁰

(4) S/PV.5158, *People's Daily*: September 19, 2006

(5) *Washington Post*: December 23, 2004

(6) Associated Press: March 12, 2007, Agence France Presse: April 11, 2007, MFAPRC: March 7, 2008

(7) Reuters: January 11, 2008

(8) Agence France Presse: April 11, 2007

(9) Agence France Presse: April 11, 2007

(10) SAS 2007: 8

And the strategy has worked. Western diplomats such as USA Special Envoy Andrew Natsios¹¹ and the then British foreign secretary Margaret Beckett¹² have welcomed the quiet behind-the-scenes efforts of the Chinese to put pressure on the Sudanese.

In sum, the evident changes above, although far from seamlessly aligned with especially the Western demands, can be interpreted as the effects of socialization processes. The change in Chinese decision-makers' behaviour towards the regime in Khartoum from messenger to persuader, suggesting that its peers should accept infringements of their sovereignty, indicates that China is at least mimicking the pro-normative behaviour demanded by a growing international consensus. This current behavioural pattern with regard to Khartoum is one which Beijing would have dubbed "*unacceptable interference*" in Sudan's domestic affairs a few years ago. But can these changes be seen as expressions of material calculation of the direct costs involved in continuing the current policy, or should one in fact search for an explanation for this shift in the social pressure exerted on Beijing to conform to a certain standard of behaviour?

(11) *Christian Science Monitor*: June 26, 2007

(12) *Xinhua*: May 17, 2007

China balances between identities, social pressure and material power

"It was an opportunity for them [China]. They were not facing the usual competition, and the Chinese government doesn't have NGOs, human rights groups lobbying them. It's a marriage of convenience."
Western diplomat on China's involvement in Darfur,
quoted in the *Financial Times*, March 22, 2005

China protects its national brand

By mid-2006, Chinese diplomats were becoming increasingly worried about the damage being inflicted on their international public image in and relationship with the West¹³ and, according to former USA diplomat Larry Rossin, increasingly concerned about the scrutiny they were coming under.¹⁴ The references to the "*Genocide Olympics*" by the mounting humanitarian advocacy campaign in the first half of 2007, together with the negative media attention focusing on China's role in Darfur, clearly disturbed Chinese diplomats and helped boost their efforts towards Khartoum. But in the search for cause and effect relations, it is important to note that a pattern of critical speech acts and behaviour by China towards Sudan was already evident, and increasingly so, from mid-2006, well before the Darfur hotspot became a scorching stain on China's public image. These factors may consequently only have accelerated a policy already decided, rather than of the role of kick-starter which some observers have attributed to it.¹⁵

Several other reasons may also have given Chinese decision-makers material motives to take a more critical stance towards Khartoum and adopt an active role in solving the crisis. The Chinese success in persuading Chad to abandon its allegiance to Taipei in favour of Beijing in August 2006 further enticed China to seek stability in Chad and western Sudan. China also became a main target of armed rebel groups raiding Chinese operations and kidnapping Chinese citizens, causing China to exercise effective leverage on the regime in Khartoum. Beijing may consequently have become more aware that the escalating violence and raids against its installations could jeopardize its economic interests in Sudan. On the other hand, China's main investments are not located in Darfur,¹⁶ and the raids started almost in autumn 2007, more than a year after the first evident changes in Chinese dealings with the Darfur Crisis.¹⁷ Again, looking for cause and effect, these seem to be unsatisfactory explanations.

(13) Alden 2007: 122

(14) Reuters: April 24, 2007

(15) See *Sudan Times*: December 21, 2007 for an example

(16) Large 2008: 7, SAS: 4

(17) Reuters: October 25, 2007

A developing country responds to the concerns of the African Union

It was not only the relationship with its Western partners that China needed to attend to. China is the world's second largest economy, but it still claims to be the world's largest developing nation.¹⁸ Towards Africa, China presents itself as the leader of the developing world.¹⁹ China's identity as a developing country in an African context means that it is very receptive to the social influence and signals coming from the group of African countries. Changes in the perception of its African partners on how the conflict should be solved may consequently also have had a decisive effect.

In 2004 China's position and policy was to a large extent shared by the African bloc and LAS. However, as far back as January 2006²⁰ many African countries and the AU began changing positions. This trend was strengthened throughout 2006²¹ as the conflict worsened and the reputation of the AU and the safety of the AU-led African Mission to Sudan (AMIS) were placed in jeopardy by Khartoum's unwillingness to cooperate. This threatened to damage Beijing's relationship with other African states if China obstructed the mission handover. China therefore needed to help alleviate the political obstacles to the AU mission. Continued stalling would put the safety of the deployed troops in jeopardy, as well as provoke the loss of face for the AU, because the AMIS operation was not able to fulfil its mission. Any such development could lose China political goodwill in Africa.

As African leaders began having a change of heart regarding how to deal with Khartoum, China could no longer justify rejecting Western criticism of its reluctance to put pressure on Sudan as mere hegemonic meddling. That would run against the grain of the emerging consensus among African leaders that something had to be done about Khartoum's stalling of the proposed solution of the Annan Plan. If China allowed itself to be isolated together with Khartoum on this issue, it would undermine the status and recognition which Chinese leaders had so abundantly acquired among their African peers. From mid-2006 there are signs of a behavioural change towards Khartoum, for example, in President Hu Jintao's statements during the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation summit in November 2006 in Beijing,²² and in January 2007 in Khartoum, where he allegedly told Sudanese President al-Bashir that "*Darfur is a part of Sudan and you have to resolve this problem*"²³ These statements may have been an attempt to boost China's social status and reputation by mimicking the new turn in the African bloc's position.

(18) MFAPRC January 23, 2006

(19) Taylor 2007: 12

(20) PSC: January 01, 2006

(21) SCR April 2006, SCR May, 2006, S/PV.5520, S/PV.5528, Associated Press: November 2, 2006

(22) Associated Press, October 12, 2006

(23) *Washington Post*: February 3, 2007

Looking for a cause and effect relationship, the increasing frustration among African leaders with al-Bashir's government²⁴ was probably crucial in Beijing's change of direction. Beijing could either choose to continue its policy line and rub against the grain of an emerging African opinion or step into line, and it certainly seems to have done so. The changing position of African states created political room for manoeuvre which enabled Beijing to pressure Khartoum more directly, since it made it possible to follow the emerging consensus of African states that Khartoum needed to step up its efforts and allow UN peacekeeping forces on to its territory. Luckily for China, the majority of African states still opposed sanctions.

A Great Power responds to the concerns of the West

While China claims to be a developing country, it also identifies itself as a modern, responsible and constructive great power which craves being "*connected to the international track*"²⁵. While it would be highly problematic to argue that there exists an affinity between the West and China, Beijing certainly seems to desire the social markers of acceptance and respect from Western capitals. What could be seen as a kind of Chinese 'double identity' in foreign relations causes a strange schism in behaviour in China's foreign policy. On the one hand China pursues engagement with the West, while on the other, like so many other developing countries, China tries to keep a distance and maintain coolness towards the current world order that the West promotes.²⁶

Beijing's response to the Darfur question initially appears to have taken the form of an uncertain balancing between different identities and interests in its relations with Khartoum. While maintaining an identity as a developing country, China wants to be a member of the group of Great Powers and to have a stake in the rules that are made internationally. China's leadership craves to be recognised as a modern power in international affairs on the same level as the other members of, for example, the UNSC. At the same time, Beijing wants to project an image of a responsible, benign and cooperative power which is actively engaged in the international community.²⁷ The form and the substance of the criticism voiced by the growing choir of Western governments, NGOs and much of the international media stung the leadership in a soft spot because the criticism publicly shamed China for not living up to the role as a responsible (socialized or perhaps even civilized) stakeholder assigned to it by the USA Deputy Secretary of State, Robert Zoellick. In September 2005, during the debate about China's 'peaceful rise', Zoellick called on China to become a "*responsible stakeholder*" and warned Beijing that its ties with *troublesome* states would "*have repercussions elsewhere*" and that Beijing therefore had to choose whether "*to*

(24) IRIN: October 11, 2006, PINR: February 5, 2007

(25) Zhang 2004: 294

(26) Taylor 2004: 89

(27) Carlson 2006: 218, Pearson 2006: 263

be against us and perhaps others in the international system as well"²⁸. This is a role which Beijing arguably wants to adopt, but it is constructed as incorporating certain standards of behaviour which are not in congruence with China's traditional foreign-policy identities as a developing but authoritarian state. The diplomatic shaming hit Chinese decisions-makers extra hard since public criticism and shaming – loss of face – are something that Chinese diplomats generally try to avoid, as can be seen in their dealings with Khartoum.²⁹

The Chinese government thus increasingly found itself losing credibility as a responsible power and hence status and respect in the eyes of much of the international community because of its support for a regime that was being accused of war crimes against its own population. This issue of non-intervention had previously been used by Western commentators to paint a picture of China as an irresponsible and non-integrated member of the international community.³⁰

China's broader foreign-policy outlook essentially stems from the perception held at the elite level that China is actually relatively weak and vulnerable within the international system.³¹ This notion clashes with the traditional Chinese self-image, which places the Middle Kingdom at the centre of the world.³² A critical driver in China's long-term goals is thus not security per se, but status. Constructivism focuses on international relations as a socially constructed environment. This sees the objects of analysis, namely decision-makers representing states, as having different or perhaps more complex goals than the mere maximisation of security and economic gain. Military and economic power may strengthen the respect and prestige that Chinese decision-makers receive from their peers internationally, but prestige and respect cannot be reduced to material power. China is arguably not a 'security maximiser' as much as a 'prestige maximiser'.³³ and its ambitions in foreign policies are also aimed at improving China's standing abroad and its social reputation and respect.³⁴ This explains why Beijing spends increasing efforts in 'branding' itself as a responsible actor on the international scene³⁵ as part of a search of new sources of domestic and external legitimacy. At the same time, Beijing does not want to fuel Cold War perceptions of its rise.³⁶

As the international community's general attitude towards Sudan became harsher, the accusations of not living up to its responsibilities in effect denied Beijing the international recognition and social acceptance, especially

(28) Zoellick 2005

(29) See *Christian Science Monitor*: February 25, 2008 for an example

(30) Carlson 2006: 217

(31) Mahbuban 2005

(32) Taylor 2004: 83, Shirk 2007

(33) Johnston 1999

(34) Taylor 2006: 2

(35) Holslag 2008: 73, Foot 2006: 86

(36) Shirk 2007

from the USA and some other powers, which the leadership desires. The growing criticism and the linkage with the Beijing Olympics also deprived Beijing of the recognition of the most important Chinese prestige project in living memory and framed China as something it did not want to be perceived as – an uncivilised champion of despots. Beijing's gradual acceptance or mimicking of a Western construction of what its new role as a responsible world power entails may therefore have helped bring this change about. Seen in the prism of this identity, the advocator(s) of interference no longer automatically belonged to a counter-identity (the hegemon and its Western client), and their statutory behaviour was acceptable to the responsible stakeholder role.

China jeopardises its comparative edge

However, there is another danger for China in this change of policy emphasis. An ending to the Darfur Conflict, the possible change in Sudan's status as a 'pariah state' in the eyes of Western governments and the subsequent restoration of normal bilateral relations could mean a renewed influx of financially and technologically superior Western firms. In fact, by stalling the UNSC resolutions calling for punitive measures and by opposing sanctions, Beijing managed to maintain the status quo in a highly advantageous manner by ensuring that Chevron, Total and Shell – companies that had previously operated in Sudan – were kept out or, as John Ryle, chairman of the Rift Valley Institute, put it, "*the Chinese calculation is to consolidate and expand while Sudan is still a pariah state*"³⁷. Given the Chinese oil interests and investments in Sudan and its status as one of the principal suppliers of arms to Sudan,³⁸ it is not surprising that China opposed UN sanctions such as resolutions 1556 and 1564. Sanctions would have put these interests at jeopardy, something that was explicitly referred to as reasons for the opposition to these resolutions and the threat to veto them by the Chinese representative.³⁹ China's interest in political stability and the protection of its investments were thus translated into an interest in the continuity of al-Bashir's government, which an UN-led intervention might have ended.

By changing its policy towards how to deal with Sudan on the Darfur issue, China risks damaging its economic links with Khartoum, though until now it has been able to maintain these. China also risks the possible re-entering of technologically superior Western oil companies if Chinese interference were to lead to a lifting of any sanctions imposed.

One could also argue that the decision to pressure Sudan may have consequences beyond the bilateral relationship, which is important in its own right. It might undermine China's comparative advantage with respect to developing states by weakening China's reputation and trustworthiness as a genuine

(37) *Washington Post*: December 23, 2004

(38) SAS: 9

(39) MFAPRC: September 20, 2004

alternative to the West's often conditional model for partnership, which China's influence partly depends on. China's policy change towards Sudan may help undermine the effort to show that China's great power status does not remove it from the interest and world view of developing countries, even though its relationship with Africa in reality resembles a traditional North-South one more than a South-South one. There is consequently an economic risk connected with China's change of policy, and it would be interesting to see how the leadership will react if this risk manifests itself in real economic loss.

Was the policy change caused by social pressure or economic incentives?

As should be clear by now, the social costs of choosing to continue its policy line towards Sudan seems to outweigh the direct material costs. China's direct material interests in the Darfur region were not likely to be threatened by a continuation of the conflict, since these are in reality negligible compared to the operations in the southern part of Sudan⁴⁰ and, more importantly, changes in China's policy became evident before China became a target of the rebels. It is also highly unlikely that the USA or Europe, if push came to shove, would pressure China – a very important trading partner – directly politically or economically on the Darfur issue. Chinese policy-makers were undoubtedly well aware of these factors. Furthermore, as already mentioned, the argument that the motivation for China's change in behaviour should be found in its concern for its international public image – that is, a concern for a 'country brand' which has direct economic advantages – does not account for the initial signs of behavioural changes observable already in 2006. Accordingly material motivations alone may be enough to explain the initial behavioural changes brought about by the influence of African states.

The danger the crisis represented for China's direct political and material relations in Africa is difficult to discern, especially because these cannot be completely removed from the social aspect because in real world politics what is socially desirable may also be economically desirable in some cases. The constructivist focus on social relations has its merits because trust and even affection between the leaders of different countries also facilitate trade and political alliances. Although the changing African position was itself of great importance for the change in the Chinese policy line, it seems unlikely that continued and unconditional Chinese support for Khartoum would seriously have weakened its attractiveness to most African governments hungry for unconditional aid and investments and thus China's direct pursuit of wealth and energy security. The social, public disgrace aspect of this relationship, and specially the political space that the African bloc's change of position gave for manoeuvre, accordingly seems to provide stronger reasons for the evident changes.

(40) Large 2008 :7

This space for manoeuvre allowed China to mimic the behaviour of a responsible stakeholder because the Western and African positions on the issue were converging.

In sum, although there were direct material benefits and motivations associated with the change in policy regarding how to deal with Khartoum, they are simply not strong enough when weighed against the social disgrace and loss of status which Chinese diplomats and decision-makers were experiencing in abundance internationally. And the material incentives for a change in policy appear too late in the chain of events to account for the changes found after mid-2006. The initial motivations behind the changes must accordingly stem from a social pressure to conform.

Is China mimicking new norms, or has it internalized them?

How, then, should one interpret these socially motivated changes? Can they be attributed to a form of strategic appeasement for the return for social markers of recognition, or are they expressions of a deeper dynamic, such as the internalization of certain norms and changes of identity and preferences? Has China been 'socialized'?

China breaks away from its traditional foreign-policy principles

China's historical experience of weakness and its 'strategic culture' give its foreign policy-makers a realist or, as some would have it, 'culturally realist posture'.⁴¹ Because of China's disastrous encounter with the colonial powers, as well as the threat of interventions by outside powers during the history of the People's Republic, China is highly sensitized to norms of 'sovereignty' and 'equality among nations'.⁴² Today China publicly defends national sovereignty through a staunch official commitment to the ethical principles embodied in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. As is evident from Chinese statements, Chinese leaders saw a political solution to the crisis as the only appropriate solution.⁴³ In the perception of Chinese decision-makers, sovereignty, not democracy or human rights, is the common and appropriate international denominator because it ensures equality among all states, understood as a plurality of different types of political and ideological regime.⁴⁴ Arguably the adherence to these traditional principles actually makes the recent evident change in Chinese foreign-policy behaviour inappropriate in the traditional perceptions of Beijing.

Identity as a blockade for internalization

The norms that have traditionally guided China's foreign-policy framework for its involvement in Africa have left a clear and traceable pattern that is evident

(41) Johnston 1995, Wang 1994: 498

(42) Li 2007: 57

(43) *People's Daily*: March 17, 2008

(44) He 2007: 33, *People's Daily*: April 3, 2006

in its policies, behaviour and speech acts concerning the issues of Darfur and Sudan, especially until mid-2006. It is clear that these dispositions, together with China's material interests, were decisive in shaping the initial Chinese policy towards Sudan. This makes it quite unlikely that the foreign-policy apparatus has been persuaded about the appropriateness of intervention, interference and conditionality underpinning the norm of Responsibility to Protect and the official Western agenda for partnerships with Africa. China's initial policy line towards Sudan was in fact quite predictable, even if material incentives had not been at work. The core identity of Chinese decision-makers as leaders of an authoritarian state, but also China's social role as the leader of the developing world in the international social context surrounding the Darfur crisis, seemed to have worked as an effective blockade against the socialization pressure to conform to the normative system and world order symbolised by the Responsibility to Protect. China's identity, its deeply entrenched domestic norms, experience and collective memory, may consequently be seen as a legacy that initially curbed pro-normative behaviour in the case of Sudan and to a certain extent still does so. As previously argued, this identity should actually make the recent evident change in Chinese foreign-policy behaviour inappropriate in the perceptions of Beijing. Apart from its more pro-active behaviour, Beijing has continued to believe in the appropriateness of non-coercive measures and continued trade, perhaps partly because doing otherwise would send the wrong signal to the leaders of African states. But one could also argue that Beijing's somewhat lukewarm conformity with the responsible stakeholder role stems from a difference of interpretation in role expectancy. As is evident in Chinese policy-makers' perceptions of their own role, China has been playing the role of responsible stakeholder not by coercing but by persuading⁴⁵ – an approach which China and other observers have found to be the most constructive path towards resolving the conflict with Khartoum.⁴⁶

The absence of a Chinese pattern of behaviour

Though there are few cases to compare with the present one directly, which reduces the certainty by which persuasion may be ruled out completely, no strong or consistent pattern of behaviour, of the sort one would expect from the internalization of norms and identities, is clearly apparent in other cases and contexts, even after 2006. This supports the argument that the apparent changes stem from an attempt to mimic a social role. The ambiguity of Beijing's policy is evident in special envoy Liu's statement in September 2007 that, given the deteriorating situation in Zimbabwe, China would reduce its substantial development aid and limit itself to humanitarian assistance,⁴⁷ but on the other hand China vetoed a resolution calling for sanctions against Zimbabwe in the wake

(45) Xinhua: June 16, 2007

(46) *Insider Forum* 2008

(47) *Daily Telegraph* August 31, 2007

of a failed democratic election in July 2008.⁴⁸ This ambiguity may reflect the fact that China's foreign-policy identity is going through a transitional phase in which complex and contradictory roles, affinities and preferences – material, social and ideational – are weighed against each other, which again leads to unpredictable outcomes. But it may also reflect the fact that, in the case of Sudan (and Zimbabwe and Burma), a common and crucial factor in Beijing's readiness to change its policy framework and mimic the role of the responsible stakeholder is as much the positions and expectations of the neighbouring countries and regional organisations such as the AU and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as Western pressure. In the case of Zimbabwe, the AU's persistent reluctance to condemn Robert Mugabe has given China little incentive or room for manoeuvre to put pressure on the government of Zimbabwe and instead has allowed China to retain its traditional stance by staying aloof and passive. Supporting interference and sanctions in the specific social context of Zimbabwe could have framed China as an imperialist meddler in the eyes of many African leaders, thereby undermining Beijing's affinities and status. This is exemplified by Liu's statement that "*we know that African countries... does not want to internationalise the issue of Zimbabwe*"⁴⁹.

Public conformity without private acceptance

Evidence that Chinese policy-makers have been persuaded to accept new norms of interference thus seems to be lacking. No deep change in preferences and norms – reflected in, for example, a consistent patterned change in policies – seems to have occurred, as the case of Zimbabwe indicates. The behavioural change should be seen as a Chinese attempt to wrap its policies up in new robes, based on a logic of social consequence. China's solution to the Sudanese dilemma thus resembles what Leon Festinger termed *public conformity without private acceptance*⁵⁰. This points to the dominance and inertia of China's earlier approach, which effectively limits how far Beijing is willing to mimic a subordinated role identity or internalise the norm associated with it. The deeper Chinese foreign-policy identity remains largely unchanged, although it seems to be in even greater tension now with external role expectations because of its gradual readiness to play the responsible role of stakeholder.

A greater sensibility towards its 'international face', a desire to maximise the normative markers of a high status and responsible power, seem to have encouraged the leadership in its mimicry. In the case of Sudan, China has attempted to maximise its status by trying to play the role of the responsible stakeholder because Beijing has learned that there is a causal connection between social recognition, status and the expectations of a role which has been bestowed upon

(48) S/PV 5933

(49) Financial Gazette September 26, 2007

(50) Quoted in Kelman 1958: 51

it due to its deeper international 'embeddedness' and rise to prominence as a great power. Beijing's interests have thus been reconstructed through social interaction and learning. Without this acceptance, it is unlikely that foreign policy-makers in Beijing would have been as willing to copy pro-normative behaviour in the first place. China's growing international integration, interdependence and intimacy make the influence of foreign role expectations stronger and makes it harder for China to discard them.

As will be discussed in the next section, while the internalization of new norms is not evident and the mimicking of a role identity mostly cosmetic, signs of a reinterpretation of norms are also present in China's current foreign-policy behaviour. While this paper's investigations do not seem to indicate that Chinese foreign policy-makers have been socialized to adopt the norms embodied in the transformative agenda of the West and the Responsibility to Protect, they certainly seem increasingly willing to mimic some of the behaviour involved and to adopt part of the role of active and responsible stakeholder ascribed to it. A pattern of behaviour does in fact seem to exist, not with respect to norms of human rights, interference or intervention per se, but with respect to this partially imposed role and its standard of behaviour, which dictates a break away from a passive stance to international affairs and a hyper-sovereign discourse.

China comes of age as a foreign policy actor

"Mo zhe shi tou guo he."
(*"Groping for stones to cross the river."*)
Deng Xiaoping

What has China learned?

This paper suggests that the explanation for the underlying diplomatic game between China and Sudan and China and the world is as much concerned with identity dynamics as material conflicts of interest. This points to the argument that China's behaviour is more complex than it is often perceived to be. The case of Darfur did not happen in an ideational vacuum but in a context heavily packed with layers of meaning, which strongly affected how differently Chinese foreign policy-makers perceived the situation and the appropriate remedies from Western governments.

Sudan has been a defining experience for Beijing in which its diverging interests and identities merged into an awkward and bumpy learning process. The Darfur crisis started a snowball effect which was unknotted anticipated by the leadership and affected China so profoundly because of its deep entanglement in an African country. China's economic and political rise in the world has occurred with such speed that its effects have taken the foreign-policy establishment in Beijing by surprise.⁵¹ This points to the changing role of China in international affairs and Beijing's experience of navigating politically in a new situation. As this case illustrates, the foreign-policy apparatus in Beijing is consequently coping to understand the implications and constraints which China's rising prominence and changes in external expectations bring to Chinese foreign policy-making.

In Sudan, China has tried to solve an identity conflict illustrating the complexity and contradictions of identity needs. This conflict will only become more pronounced as China integrates itself more deeply internationally and ascends out of the status of developing country as a modernised great power. Can China's identity as a great power and the Western construction of a responsible stakeholder role be squared with the identity of a developing country and China's claimed role as the leader of the developing world? Beijing's own difficulties in navigating between these role identities in the case of Sudan suggest that this may be quite difficult. To succeed, the Chinese diplomatic machinery has to increase its flexibility.

But the case of Sudan also shows that the policy apparatus in Beijing has at least been quite adaptive and resourceful. The ability simultaneously to appease international criticism and provide continued support to the Sudanese

(51) Jakobson 2007: 17

government while keeping an eye on the changing positions of its African partners generally was no small feat. The increasing diplomatic flexibility of its apparatus has helped Beijing maintain its links with Sudan without suffering too much damage to its image and social status. Beijing seems to be getting better at this because its policy-makers are learning that deeper international integration requires a more careful assessment of policy choices and that a larger number of issues and interests are taken into account. A decade ago, policy-makers in Beijing would probably not have cared or been as susceptible to this normative pressure as they are now.

Transformations and reinterpretations

The findings and arguments presented on the preceding pages contribute to the recent debates on whether and to what extent China is being socialized into an international community. China's changing attitude and response to the policy questions surrounding the Darfur crisis is a part of, and may work to strengthen, a wider trend in China's foreign policies. While it would be premature to call this a new foreign-policy *doctrine*, it is arguable that a new foreign-policy *practice* is emerging. This has been going on for some years,⁵² and while the present investigation cannot demonstrate the internalization of certain new norms, the gradual change exhibited by Beijing on the Sudan issue may be seen as a part of a wider trend as China comes of age as a foreign-policy actor. This change stems from the learning of new causal linkages, new perceptions of interest and its policy-makers' partial acceptance of an imposed role, rather than from a shift in values or a revision of historical learning, which reflect a deeper identity.

Reinterpreting sovereignty

First, China is now in some cases more ready to bend the self-protection principles of sovereignty and non-interference. The willingness to trade off China's own sovereignty is, of course, most prominent on economic issues with direct material pay-offs, such as China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001. But on some issues directly related to national security, Chinese decision-makers are recognising that certain trans-sovereign concerns, such as terrorism, the drugs trade, pandemics and climate change, require a softer stand on sovereignty and cooperation.

A similar trend can be seen in China's policies towards other countries in certain cases and contexts. Several scholars underscore the fact that the significance of sovereignty in China's foreign-policy practice is being eroded by its increasing international integration⁵³ and thirty years of membership of the UN-SC.⁵⁴ In fact China has been tweaking its principles since the 1990s to accommo-

(52) For earlier discussions on the signs of transformation of the Chinese foreign policy identity, see Medeiros and Fravel 2003, Foot 2001

(53) Johnston 2008: 205

(54) Carlson 2004, Pang 2005

date and actively participate in 'Western'-sponsored UN operations.⁵⁵ As Bates Gill puts it, "*Increasingly, as China's new security diplomacy pragmatically engages the outside world and seeks a role as a responsible great power, Chinese policies about sovereignty and interventionism are likewise changing and becoming more flexible*⁵⁶". China's participation in UN missions has expanded in scope and numbers, from an average of 50⁵⁷ to more than 2,000⁵⁸ deployed personnel during the last decade. In December 2008 China participated in more than half of all UN missions as the fourteenth biggest contributor, making it a larger provider than other UNSC members such as the USA, Russia or Great Britain. With more than 300 troops deployed, China is now part of the African Union/United Nations Hybrid operation in Darfur, which is acting under Chapter VI of the United Nations Charter.

This development has several explanations. A pragmatic stand on security-related issues around the world gives the leadership more elbow room to tend to the problems emerging at home in an increasingly dynamic society and economy.

Furthermore, while a 'hard' conception of sovereignty and an adherence to the principle of non-interference still remains a pivotal point in the official Chinese rhetoric, such a practice does not seem workable for a great power with global interests. Sovereignty may have been useful when China was relatively weak and isolated, but the principle of sovereignty also limits the diplomatic room for manoeuvre and does not square well with China's international integration. Globalisation and China's own craving for resources and export markets entangles Chinese companies and state interests in the affairs of states with less stable political, economic and security environments than, for example, Western countries. China's increasing political support and deployment of personnel to UN missions might consequently be explained as an attempt to stabilize countries and regions where Chinese interests are at stake. This again necessitates a break from the official rhetoric of 'hard' sovereignty. As an emerging world power, China will find it difficult to protect and monitor its international interests in energy security and stable economic growth under the aegis of 'hard' sovereignty. China dispatched three warships to the Gulf of Aden in its first overseas escort mission for merchant vessels on 26 December 2008, indicating that Beijing is becoming aware that not only does the image of a responsible and constructive power require action and initiative internationally, so does the protection of its domestic interests. In Beijing the debates have moved on from how to defend the principle of non-interference to the conditions under which

(55) Carlson 2006: 218

(56) Gill 2007: 113

(57) http://www.globalpolicy.org/images/pdfs/Z/Tables_and_Charts/pktp98.pdf, accessed november 2009

(58) http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/contributors/2008/dec08_1.pdf, accessed november 2009

interventions are justified.⁵⁹ According to Linda Jakobson, several Chinese foreign-policy analysts in Beijing acknowledge in private conversations that in the long run the principle of non-interference is no longer practical, viable or in line with China's current national interests.⁶⁰ In time, as China's interests and power grow, its need to defend state sovereignty and non-interference will assume diminishing importance.⁶¹

Moreover, this erosion of the principles of sovereignty and non-interference makes personal interaction between Chinese leaders and their peers in other (Western) capitals much more streamlined and strengthens diplomatic goodwill and empathy towards China.⁶² In private discussions about China's Africa policy and its relationship with Sudan, Chinese diplomats do not voice concerns about violating the principle of non-interference.⁶³ One could argue that, by accepting this 'softer' conceptualisation of sovereignty, China is cloaking itself under the benign face of a socialized great power which conforms to a certain standard of civilisation. China's conformity to the expected behaviour of a constructed role identity could serve to diffuse the wariness with which many of its peer leaders, especially in the West, are watching its rising star. In fact, official notions of non-interference should be attributed to ideological inertia, rather than being seen as a norm having any practical influence over the leadership,⁶⁴ though this may not prove so true if one were to dig deeper into the older parts of the People's Party apparatus.⁶⁵

Accepting the role of a responsible stakeholder

Secondly, the realization that there is a connection between external expectations and Beijing's interests in maximizing its status appears to have led to a reassessment in Beijing's view of its role and responsibilities. Beijing has previously sought many of the rights and privileges of a great power without accepting most of the attendant obligations and responsibilities. China has since become more ready to condition its diplomatic protection of pariah states and to support and even create paths for non-coercive solutions.⁶⁶ While not exaggerating changes in its foreign policy or behaviour, which in many ways remain the same, China seem to have taken on some responsibility, which is reflected not only in talk about its constructive and responsible role, but also in its action⁶⁷ in accepting the USA's call for a responsible stakeholdership.

(59) Kleine-Ahlbrandt and Small 2008

(60) Jakobson 2007: 14

(61) Kleine-Ahlbrandt and Small 2007

(62) Holslag 2007: 13

(63) Shirk 2007

(64) Shirk 2007

(65) Kleine-Ahlbrandt and Small 2008

(66) Kleine-Ahlbrandt and Small 2008

(67) See Washington Post October 11, 2006 for an example

Generalising from such recent diplomatic hot topics as Sudan, Burma, North Korea and China's active participation in UN peace-keeping operations in, for example, Liberia and Sudan, it seems as if China has been moving away from a defensive stance promoting South-South solidarity to a more sophisticated attempt to balance its economic needs and traditional foreign-policy norms to its acknowledged position as a responsible power. Chinese behaviour in Sudan is reflected in its behaviour in Burma, a country where Western governments have little leverage. China has been fending off multilateral sanctions since the crack-down on the democratic opposition in September 2007, which was condemned by ASEAN.⁶⁸ At the same time, however, China has been pressing the Junta to stop the violence and in spring of 2008 pulled strings behind the scenes in Burma following the Nargis cyclone disaster to get the regime to accept international aid.⁶⁹ Other examples of a change in behaviour include its acceptance of partial sanctions against North Korea after Pyongyang conducted a nuclear test in October 2006⁷⁰ and a harder stance on the issue of Iran,⁷¹ which supplies China with much of its oil.⁷² A pattern of behaviour is arguably apparent, caused not by the acceptance of new norms as such, but by the gradual acceptance of a bestowed role. Robert Zoellick's demand that China take responsibility does seem to have had an effect.

Accommodating the concerns of its partners

Thirdly, China is learning that its bilateral relations with Western countries, especially the USA, cannot be disentangled from such 'rogue' states as North Korea, Burma, Zimbabwe, Iran and Sudan. Beijing is consequently becoming more willing to accommodate the diplomatic concerns that are expressed about its own policies, as well as the behaviour of its partners in the developing world. These cases and this paper's findings clearly show that Beijing has become more willing to mimic behaviour on issues which it has traditionally wanted to stay aloof from in order to gain social recognition.

Not everyone would agree with this assessment. Many observers note that Chinese leaders still take a mostly passive approach to world affairs through a strategy of maximising their interests through minimal international involvement and by "*free-riding on the actions of other major powers*"⁷³. It is true that China's formal commitments to human rights and the Responsibility to Protect seem less than half-hearted. China's solution for the Sudanese dilemma – its partial accommodation of international concerns – does not mean that China's interests and preferences are seamlessly aligned with the West on the Darfur

(68) ASEAN September 9, 2007

(69) CNN 26-09-07, Christian Science Monitor 27-05-08

(70) S/PV 5551

(71) S/PV 5612

(72) Downs 2007

(73) Medeiros and Fravel 2003

issue, nor that China has automatically changed its wider framework of engagement. The evidence and trends identified above need to be viewed in a context in which China's investments in, trade with and selling of weapons to 'rogue states' continue unabated. But as this paper has shown, there is certainly also ample evidence of changes in the opposite direction. The findings of this paper and of others indicate that in some cases, where its pre-existing trajectory has led more in the direction of conflict on certain normative issues, China has been willing and able to redefine policies in accordance with the role-identity of a responsible stakeholder ascribed to it. China has redefined its perceived foreign-policy interest through social interaction.

Conclusion and perspectives

"We have been playing a role of bridge, we have been trying to give advice and to persuade Sudan to be more flexible to accept the UN plan."

Ambassador Liu Guijin,

quoted in *China Daily*, 16 June 2007

This paper has argued that, even though material incentives exist for China to conform to social pressure, Chinese decision-makers' desire for social acceptance was paramount in the case of Darfur. And whereas Beijing has not moved away from the language of sovereignty, in practice it has traded off the norm of non-interference for this acceptance. Beijing has actively pressed another state to accept an infringement of its sovereignty in an effort to mimic the role of the responsible stakeholder and to accommodate the concerns of its western and African partners. Beijing chose this path primarily through a calculation of its social consequences, and the evident changes thus equal strategic mimicking on a case-by-case basis in order to earn social markers of status and respect internationally.

But it still troubles the West that China's rise and strategy in Africa still seem predicated on offering an alternative order regarding foreign investments and development aid, as well as diplomatic support for governments that are weary of the norms imposed on them by Western actors, even though these norms are embedded in African initiatives such as the AU and the New Partnership for Africa's Development. This raises uncomfortable questions for the West in respect of its own ability to retain its current position and the futility of its current agenda for the African continent in the face of Chinese economic and normative competition.

Human rights, good governance, democracy, conflict prevention and resolution, as well as consumer markets and the search for resources, are likely to remain priorities of Western governments in the future. The successful framework of China's engagement in Africa consequently presents Western foreign

policy-makers with a dilemma. How can they maintain their positions and frameworks in Africa and secure their economic interests without abandoning many of the transformative aspects of their approach to partnership in Africa? The norms and institutions embodied in this framework, emphasising the liberal constitutional state as a key element in developing market economies, are challenged by the Chinese comparative edge.

But as the findings above show, China has, if not internalized, then at least started mimicking a notion of what amounts to appropriate behaviour as a responsible power in the Western perception on a case-to-case basis. The legitimacy of Chinese opposition to intervention and conditionalities on some issues may therefore be undermined if the West can successfully frame this as an obligation which China should follow as a responsible power. This 'identity argument' may be used strategically, as it seems to have been by US politicians on several occasions, nudging China to trade economic incentives and traditional principles for social status, image and respect.

International recognition of the steps taken rather than confrontation, coupled with dialogue over coercion, may in the long run be a more fertile approach to socializing China into acting as a responsible power. China is, however, unlikely to become a reliable partner in the Western governments' agenda for Africa and their own inconsistent dealings with dictatorships here, let alone in the wider world. But China is increasingly becoming an important and necessary part of the solution to many problems on this agenda, whether China or the West like it or not. Western governments had better come up with a coherent Africa strategy which incorporates the reality of China's presence on the continent.

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