

## **China starts to pull its weight at the UN**

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Twice in the past month, China has supported tough UN Security Council resolutions on the world's most dangerous problems. These were difficult decisions and they surprised many observers. In truth, they were the culmination of a decades-long process that has seen China's assertiveness at the UN follow the same growth curve as its economic strength and military capacity.

First Beijing condemned North Korea's provocative missile launches in July. Beijing has good reason to be cautious about pushing Pyongyang too hard, being loath to see a collapsed state on the Korean Peninsula or suffer American GIs on its eastern border, so this was a significant step. Then it voted for a resolution insisting that Iran - which China has shielded from scrutiny in international forums - cease uranium enrichment or reprocessing.

China has quickened the pace of its interactions with the United Nations, outperforming the United States in New York. It is now facing a new test: to step up and assume the responsibilities that are incumbent upon a global power.

China's new approach to the United Nations can be discerned in its approach to the Security Council, peacekeeping and personnel. Historically, China was a passive, even defensive council member, rarely seeking to shape the agenda and abstaining on most sensitive issues. These days, China's representatives behave more confidently in the council chamber and more volubly before the media. China is increasingly willing to take the lead on issues and behave more like a normal great power - and it is being treated as such by other council members, including the United States.

Beijing has partly overcome its allergy to enforcement measures and voted for the establishment of important UN peacekeeping missions. It also helps staff them: China today deploys more military and civilian police personnel to UN peacekeeping operations than any of the other five permanent members of the Security Council.

The quality of the people China sends to New York, both as diplomats and officials, has improved noticeably. According to one UN insider, the Chinese used to take a "prophylactic" approach to placing people in the United Nations, seeking to shield them from outside influence. Now, by contrast, "they want to spread their influence."

(As China has stepped up its engagement with the UN, Washington has stood down. After the Bush administration's recess appointment of John Bolton - the man who once said "there is no such thing as the United Nations" - as UN ambassador, Bolton has thrown his weight around at the UN, but if anything his ambassadorship has telegraphed American weakness.)

China's representatives are more skillful and confident these days in the way they do business in New York, but they have not internalized all the responsibilities of a global power. Sometimes China pursues its narrowly drawn interests - energy security, for example, or the existential struggle with Taiwan - with an uncompromising resolve that would be described as amoral belligerence were it attempted by the United States. If China truly wants to be perceived as a "responsible stakeholder" then it must conceive of its interests more broadly than it has in the past, and help to nurture the international system it aspires to lead.

The horrors occurring in the Darfur region of Sudan are a case in point. It is hard to escape the conclusion that China provides political protection in the Security Council to Khartoum in return

for preferential access to oil. China has consistently resisted, diluted or abstained from resolutions that threaten real consequences for the government of Sudan, with which Beijing has negotiated trade deals and oil industry investments. With the world's attentions directed toward American overreach, China has largely escaped scrutiny on these kinds of issues - but not for much longer.

China's recent Security Council votes on North Korea and Iran point to a welcome - and hopefully permanent - development in Chinese doctrine. China's rise will force many such difficult decisions on its leaders. An easy decision that Beijing could take to signal its bona fides would be voluntarily to increase the rather ungenerous dues it pays to the United Nations - currently about 2 percent of the organization's regular budget, or \$40 million per annum - to a level more appropriate for a country with the world's fourth-largest economy and almost \$1 trillion in foreign-exchange reserves.

According to one long-time UN observer, China is "playing a strong hand well." Its multilateral diplomacy is notable for its intelligence and subtlety. But to stay competitive in the game over the long term, Beijing will need to alter its tactics once again. In the future China will be held to higher standards, akin to those demanded of the United States, because with great power comes great responsibility.

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