



# China's Role in the Darfur Peace Process and Its Implications

By Danielle Wu

*When the Sudanese government recently signed ceasefire agreements with major rebel groups, the Darfur peace process gained momentum. The peace process attracts attention from China because of its energy and economic interests in Sudan. China is believed to have persuaded Khartoum to accept the proposed deals. China believes that its role in the peace process shows the world that it is making serious efforts to shoulder its international responsibility.*

## The Darfur Peace Process and its Connection With China

Darfur has long been blighted with wars and conflicts among tribes and ethnic groups. In February and March this year, Sudan signed ceasefire agreements with two major Darfur rebel groups, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and the Liberation and Justice Movement (LJM). Meanwhile, a donor conference for Darfur, held in March, raised US\$841 million for infrastructure, health, water and other reconstruction projects. These are significant events signaling that this war-ravaged region might see the light of peace after a seven-year long conflict.

China has maintained its contact and communication with the relevant parties in the peace negotiations. The question that must be answered is what role the country played in the peace process and what the implications are for China and the world.

Since the crisis in Darfur came into the international limelight, China has been in an awkward position. International media have continually highlighted the fact that Beijing blocked sanctions on Sudan in the UN Security Council. Human rights groups were outraged and launched protests against China. In their view, Beijing turned a blind eye to the humanitarian crisis in Darfur whilst China's considerable economic relations with Su-

dan would enable it to exert real influence on Khartoum.

China has significant energy interests in Sudan, where its largest overseas oil project is based. The state owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has been active in Sudan since 1996 and owns a 40 percent share in the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company (GNPOC), a major oil operator in Sudan. China also has stakes and investments in oil enterprises in Libya and Ethiopia. Any spillover of the regional conflict could possibly impair China's African energy strategy. Also, Beijing was wary that interference could be engendered from other actors. China was unwilling to harm relations with Sudan's neighbor Chad shortly after it recognized China over Taiwan a year ago. It is apparent that the conflict and instability in the region could pose great risks and cause serious damage to China's interests. The last thing China would want to see is the deterioration of the situation in Darfur. Why then have China been silent when other stakeholders actively mediated between the conflicting parties?

## China's Approach and its Rationales

Following its long standing policy of non-interference, China prefers internal conflicts to be settled by the parties directly concerned. It values sovereignty more than anything else. It is a tool that it has been frequently uti-



lized to mark problems in Tibet and Xinjiang as issues of sovereignty, rejecting any attempts of external interference. Hence China is in support of the notion that Sudan should attempt to handle the problem in Darfur itself, and is therefore reluctant to put direct pressure on the Bashir government. China views the conflicts as being deeply rooted in underdevelopment, caused by the lack of natural recourses and failed governance. Its prescription for a solution is intermediate humanitarian aid plus long term development assistance. Beijing hopes to relieve the humanitarian crisis and stabilize the region in the short term and undergird its economic ties with Sudan in the long term. It assumes that the coercive sanctions and the indictment of the International Criminal Court will be of no benefit, and will only complicate the matter further.

The situation has continually changed overtime. Khartoum refused to participate in the meeting of the UN Security Council and turned down the UN's offer of peacekeeping forces in August of 2006. In the high profile China-Africa Summit in November 2006 and China's President Hu Jintao's visit to Sudan in early 2007, concerns were publicly iterated. The crises were escalating at the beginning of 2008 when the Beijing Olympics was approaching. Amid waves of protest, Beijing was embarrassed that its reputation as "a responsible stakeholder" was seriously tarnished. China came to learn that sometimes its "business is business" mentality did not play out very well. It had to take some actions to save its "face" under the increasing international pressure. After all, economic interests make it impossible for China not to be active, in some way or another, in key regional affairs.

On one hand, China managed to keep a delicate balance in pushing forward Bashir to accept Kofi Annan's three-phase peace plan, and at the same time, keeping him from getting annoyed. On the other hand, it tried hard to convince other countries in the UN Security Council that imposing sanctions would only be counterproductive. While a debate has been going on about how much influence China exerted on the peace process, China's role has certainly shifted from that of a passive bystander to being a leading actor. On February 14, 2008, Chinese For-

eign Ministry Spokesperson Liu Jianchao made a remark that China "helped to facilitate the hard won consensus among the Sudanese government, AU and UN on the deployment of hybrid action."

### A Changing China in a Changing World

China's changing behavior towards the Darfur problem reflects its gradually changing perceptions of the concept of sovereignty and international responsibility. Having been relatively isolated from the international system for several decades before opening up, China used to be an outsider and seldom felt obliged to conform to international norms and rules. However, it has gone through a process of "socialization" after it introduced market economy. It revised its own international identity from a "reformer" to a "conformer" and has gradually learned to pursue its interests by participating in international institutions. China's changing route on the Darfur problem mirrors the change of its understanding of what Beijing sees as its appropriate role. Certainly China has previously underestimated the expectations of other stakeholders, but its adjustment is relatively quick and ongoing.

At the same time, when China integrates itself more and more into the international system, its own sensitivity and vulnerability to the changes of the international situation has greatly increased. The entangled web of interdependence forced China to reconsider its stance on sovereignty and non-interference. Although it still considers the norm of non-intervention as an all-important lodestar for its foreign policy, it has recognized humanitarian intervention as acceptable under certain circumstances and altered its previous indifference to UN peacekeeping to active participation. Ever since then, it has found that peacekeeping is a very efficient way to strengthen its role in the United Nations and to protect its own overseas interests. By committing itself to UN peacekeeping, China intends to demonstrate to the world that it is making serious efforts to shoulder its international responsibility, a concept that it has only been acquainted with relatively recently.

Although it is still challenging to realize ultimate peace



in Darfur, with the rivalries of dozens of tribes resurfacing and the longing for shares in oil profits, the Darfur peace process has been making progress. China adopted a rational approach as the result of its continuing socialization in the international system and its changing perception on sovereignty, national interests and international responsibility. Undoubtedly, China will continue to support the peace effort through its own soft lined diplomatic persuasion instead of exerting cohesion. China realizes that the best way for it to be able to change the world is to change itself. External criticism on its African engagement will continue to shape China's conceptions of its own role in Africa and the manner in which it conducts its policies.

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