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Integrating China into an International Human Rights Regime: The Case of Darfur

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Integrating China into an International Human Rights Regime: The Case of Darfur

Abstract

Chinese leaders find themselves in unknown territory as they guide the Chinese state. Their unusual experiment combines Communist party rule with unbridled capitalism. Under these unique circumstances, a major challenge they face is to define their country's global role as an emerging power. From what compass will they navigate their direction? If their guidance system is built for a world of international anarchy, national interest and power politics, then the direction of their course is clear. Because of U.S. neglect and indifference, Africa, rich in natural resources, is up for grabs. Flexing its muscles on the world stage with its "soft power," China has the economic power to buy friends and win influence in Africa and withstand international pressure.

Keywords

China, Sudan, Darfur, United States, International relations

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Chinese leaders find themselves in unknown territory as they guide the Chinese state. Their unusual experiment combines Communist party rule with unbridled capitalism. Under these unique circumstances, a major challenge they face is to define their country's global role as an emerging power. From what compass will they navigate their direction? If their guidance system is built for a world of international anarchy, national interest and power politics, then the direction of their course is clear. Because of [U.S. neglect and indifference](#), Africa, rich in natural resources, is up for grabs. Flexing its muscles on the world stage with its "soft power," China has the economic power to buy friends and win influence in Africa and withstand international pressure.

In their foreign policy, Chinese leaders are heavily influenced by domestic politics, the need for economic prosperity, and a desire for international prestige. They are not unmindful of the nationalist aspirations of the people of China. In Susan Shirk's analysis, China is a ["fragile superpower."](#) Having access to oil is a *sine qua non* of maintaining prosperity at home—a prosperity that keeps the party in power. By these metrics, Sudan is important and China's relationship with the Sudanese regime must be protected; respecting Sudan's sovereignty makes sense and concerns about human rights violations are secondary.

But there is another side to China's dilemma. Chinese decision makers confront an interdependent world and the acceptance of the rule of international law cannot be rejected out of hand. In an era of globalization, China's power is insured by its economic success. It holds reserves of a trillion dollars—three quarters of which is in U.S. bonds. But this strength is a double-edged sword. The world's dependence on China goes with China's dependence on the world as a market for its products. This relationship produces jobs guaranteeing a phenomenal growth rates averaging seven percent per year. Moreover, The intelligent use of its soft power creates the opportunity to convert its economic power into influence and ultimately consolidate its position through matching military capability.

In the meantime, China has to care about what the world thinks of its behavior. Therefore, for internal and external reasons, China needs recognition through events such as the [2008 Olympics](#).

A key variable in shaping Chinese behavior is the influence, prestige and goals of the world's only superpower—the United States. In debating its Sudan policy, what should Chinese leaders learn from American action in Iraq? If the Iraq intervention had been successful, the spigot to control that oil would be in the hands of future American Dick Cheneys and Donald Rumsfelds.

China sees itself as respecting the sovereignty of Sudan and avoiding interference in Sudan's internal affairs. It refuses to embrace openly international pronouncements concerning human rights violations. Chinese policy makers might ask themselves: How does this compare to what the U.S. is doing in Iraq? In Iraq, which international norms are the United States committed to enforcing?

So, in Sudan, as China attempts to navigate among national security concerns and the norms of international human rights law, the international community confronts its own dilemma. A rising power is learning how to assume its international responsibilities while protecting its national interest for oil resources. The dominant world power, the United States, addresses the crisis in Sudan with its role as moral leader compromised because of its irresponsible adventures in Iraq. Having sacrificed its moral authority and military power in the Iraq catastrophe, the U.S.'s pivotal role as moral leader is diminished. Without the U.S. in a position to move the emerging power toward concerns for humanitarian law, Chinese policy will drift, showing flexibility behind the scenes but refusing to endanger its strategic position. After all, humanitarian intervention often involves strong words by the international community followed up with little action. In this context, Chinese behavior will be contradictory—at times, China will use its influence to moderate Sudan's policies and other times it will use its influence to stabilize the flow of oil to its booming economy.

In today's nightmarish world, the people of Darfur are not the only victims. Sudan is emblematic of how much has been lost in the wake of the debacle in Iraq—greatly diminished is humanity's hope for an international order that transcends power politics and embraces an international regime where crimes against humanity are prevented.

Harry Kreisler is Executive Director of the [Institute of International Studies](#) at the University of California at Berkeley. In that role, he shapes, administers, and implements interdisciplinary academic and public affairs programs that analyze global issues. He is also creator, executive producer and host of [Conversations with History](#), an interview program, broadcast nationally every Thursday evening on satellite television, and on [cable](#) throughout California. [Conversations with History](#) is also a critically acclaimed online archive containing more than 360 one-hour interviews with distinguished men and women from all over the world who talk about their lives and their work. Harry Kreisler is also Executive Producer of [Connecting Students to the World](#), a World Wide Web -based program that introduces students and retirees to leading figures in international affairs through online curricula, preparatory workshops, and Internet conversations.