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The Darfur Dilemma

From “non-interference” to a more constructive engagement:
China’s role in the attempt to bring peace to Darfur

by

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Abstract

In the West, it was widely assumed that the major obstacle to ending the atrocities in Darfur was Beijing’s political support of Khartoum. This paper aims to give a more precise account of China’s role in the conflict in Darfur. The study also sets out to analyze the stages of, and reasons behind, China’s changing attitude vis-à-vis Khartoum. The explanation for this shift proves to be highly complex, as it includes factors such as China’s political and economic interests in Sudan, its aspiration to uphold good relations with the international community and its desire to host a successful Beijing Olympics in 2008 despite calls for boycott due to China’s close ties with Khartoum.

The main conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that China’s approach to foreign policy, which differs greatly from that of its Western counterparts, initially invoked a lot of international criticism; however, when China over time moved closer to the pre-existing conventions of foreign diplomacy, such reproaches were heard less and less.

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1. Introduction

The ongoing conflict in Darfur has resulted in the most serious humanitarian crisis of the early 21st century. In this conflict, China has found itself in the center of attention, for although it is not directly involved in the crisis, it has played a central and highly controversial role. While on the one hand the Chinese government supported its Sudanese counterpart in Khartoum by maintaining political and economic relations and protecting the country from sanctions, at the same time China contributed to international efforts to gain the Sudanese government's approval of a UN presence in Darfur. Thus, Beijing¹ has found itself increasingly in a dilemma: to continue its support of Khartoum, thereby damaging the image of a "responsible stakeholder" that Beijing is so keen to uphold, or to bow to the pressure exerted by Western countries, thereby risking a departure of its doctrine of non-interference that has been a key factor in China's successful expansion in Africa. It was this dilemma that led to a shift in Beijing's foreign policy towards Khartoum, and a move from its traditional policy of non-interference to a more constructive engagement.

In this context, "The Darfur Dilemma" seeks to shed light on the development of China's move from a "business is business" stance to one much more engaged, and to illustrate China's role in an attempt to bring peace to Darfur. This paper is divided into three sections. Section 1 examines the policy of non-interference, its origins, the history of its unfolding in China, and the notion of the principle in China today, as well as its connection to China's engagement in Africa. Section 2 reflects on China's dilemma over Darfur, by providing some contextual background, spelling out China's political and

¹ "China" and "Beijing" are used interchangeably throughout this paper to refer to the Chinese government.

economic relations to Sudan and examining the international pressure that Beijing found itself increasingly exposed to. The third section is dedicated to identifying and analysing the change in China's stance vis-à-vis Khartoum between 2003 and 2008. Key moments in this development will be outlined and considered contextually, followed by an overall assessment of China's role in the conflict.

This paper is based on the discussion and synthesis of existing scholarly literature in the form of primary sources; namely newspaper articles in English and Chinese, and secondary sources such as books, articles and reports, written by European, American, Chinese and African scholars from widely different political, economic and historical backgrounds.

2. Literature review

While almost all scholars concerned with the crisis in Darfur acknowledge that China played a central role in the conflict², there exist some discrepancies as to the nature of that role, or at least, very different focusses are placed thereupon. Some scholars mainly highlight China's positive influence on the development of the conflict, while others emphasize the more problematic role China has played.

Several scholars behold the Chinese approach as a "diplomatic victory" that proved to be adjuvant in China's consolidation within the international community. Holslag (2007) argues that Beijing's engagement in Darfur was, from a Chinese perspective, highly successful, as China was able to increase its moral influence, reassure its partners in Africa and the West, safeguard Sudanese oil and uphold its belief in sovereignty and state consent (Holslag 2007: 2). Shinn (2009), too, concludes that China "balanced successfully its interests in Sudan against the criticism that it received, mainly from the

² A prominent exception are Julie Flint and Alex de Waal, who's *"Darfur: A History of a Long War"*, which appeared in 2008, makes no mention whatsoever as to China's role in the conflict.

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West and especially the United States, for its support of a government that contributed to the atrocities in Darfur.” (Shinn 2009: 95). However, not all scholars agree with these optimistic standpoints. Wang (2005) concludes her article with the words “Darfurians have become the tragic victims of China’s “peaceful rise” as a world power.” (Wang 2005: 89). Jakobson (2007) argues that “[i]nternationally, China has lost considerable credibility because of the intertwining of its commercial interests with its political and military support for the al-Bashir regime.” (Jakobson 2007: 16). She concludes that non-interference is “not a credible policy for a nation that wants to be respected as a responsible global power.” (Jakobson 2007: 18).

3. China’s traditional policy of non-interference

As one is unlikely to come across a study on China’s 21st century relations with Africa without a mention of its principle of non-interference (Osondu 2013: 225), a proper understanding of the principal is crucial in order to fully comprehend this relatively new relation. Therefore, the following section examines the policy of non-interference, its origins, the history of its unfolding in China, and the notion of the principle in China today, as well as its connection to China’s engagement in Africa.

3.1. The origin of the principle

Since the emergence of states with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, international relations have been based on sovereignty from whence the principle of non-interference derives. Sovereignty encompasses all matters in which each state is permitted by international law to decide and act without interference from other sov-

erign states. Non-interference stems from the traditional notion in international relations of the equality of states. The principle of sovereignty is supported by customary international law and is well documented in the Charter of the UN which is subscribed to by almost every sovereign state. Within the Charter, there is an explicit prohibition on world organizations interfering in the domestic affairs of other member states. (Osondu 2013: 226).

3.2. The principle in a Chinese context

China’s official policy of non-interference relates to international politics. The principle is informed by China’s experience of imperialist intervention by Japan and the Western countries during the Century of National Humiliation (Callahan 2012: 3)³. It was formulated in an attempt to offer an alternative to a world of bipolarity, military alliances and dependent development. (Richardson 2010: 9). Since the 1950s, non-interference in other countries’ domestic affairs has been one of the five pillars of Chinese foreign policy (Jakobson 2007: 14). Non-interference is coupled with a strong notion of state sovereignty, based on territorial integrity and unity (Bradbury 2012/3: 372). Western governments have tended to see the Five Principles as “empty rhetoric” rather than a “clear Chinese articulation of its expectations about and obligations to international relations” (Richardson 2010: 12). However, China’s ties with States that have had negative experiences with the United States or the former USSR, significant developmental obstacles, or twentieth-century liberation struggles, demonstrate

³ The century of humiliation (*bainian guochi* 百年国耻) refers to the period of intervention and imperialism by Western powers and Japan in China between 1839 and 1949. (Kaufmann 2010: 1 - 33)

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the fact that the principles have in fact been put into effect (Richardson 2010: 12).

Obviously, there are also strong domestic reasons for China to persistently uphold its policy of non-interference. For example, China is not willing to allow UN peacekeeping forces to enter its territory, for instance in relation to the conflicts in TAR (Tibet Autonomous Region) and Xinjiang. Until now, China has dealt with such crises quickly and forcefully on its own (Shinn 2009: 89).

3.3. Non-interference and China's Africa engagement

Regarding China's engagement in Africa, the policy of non-interference is one frequently reiterated by the Chinese government and its officials. According to the "China Internet Information Centre", a web portal authorized by the PRC, China's Africa Policy can be summarized in six points, the first one being:

China adheres to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, respects African countries' choice in political system and development path suited to their own national conditions, does not interfere in internal affairs of African countries, and supports them in their just struggles for safeguarding their independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and their efforts in maintaining their countries' stability, unity, and in promoting the development of society and the economy (China.org.cn, 2003). China's principle of non-interference has sparked a highly controversial debate over its implications for China's contemporary engagement in Africa. To many Western governments, China's principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of States in Africa is an irresponsible approach which undermines their efforts to promote democracy and human rights in African countries. China,

on the other hand, argues that attempts by foreign nations to exert influence violate the rights of sovereign States. While some scholars argue that this principle is culpable of undermining consolidation of democracy, good governance and implementation of human rights in Africa, others maintain that for many African governments it has become an alternative to the economic prescriptions imposed by some Western countries (Osondu 2013: 225).

4. The Darfur dilemma

4.1. Background of the Darfur conflict

The conflict in Darfur began in early 2003, when two loosely allied rebel groups, the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), attacked government military installations. Reasons for these attacks included economic and political marginalisation, under-development, as well as a long-standing government policy of arming and supporting militias from Darfur's Arab nomadic tribes against the mainly African farming communities (ICG Africa report: 1). Another root cause of the crisis goes back to the 1980s, when prolonged droughts accelerated the desertification of northern and central Darfur and led to pressure on water and grazing resources as the camel nomads were forced to move southwards (NY Times, 2004).

After a succession of rebel victories in the first few months of the conflict, the government began dispatching the Janjaweed militias⁴, who, backed by the government's regular forces,

⁴ The Janjaweed are an armed militia sponsored by President Al-Bashir that, in return, pledge full allegiance to the Al-Bashir regime by fighting alongside Khartoum regular forces. The Janjaweed, composed of Sudanese Arab tribes, are gunmen or armed militias who fight on backs of horses and are highly feared in Darfur. (Sawadogo 2013: 157)

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attacked civilians suspected of supporting the rebel movement. Darfur is a Muslim region, but the government, in an attempt to crush sympathizers of the rebels, managed to manipulate ethnic divisions between Arabs and Africans. The consequences were massive displacement, indiscriminate killings, looting, mass rape, and the disintegration of the delicate ethnic balance in the region (ICG Africa report: 1). The ongoing conflict in Darfur has resulted in the most serious humanitarian crisis of the early 21st century (Lee, Chan, Chan 2011: 429).

4.2. China's political and economic relations to Sudan

After the discovery of oil in 1978, China's position in Sudanese domestic and international affairs ceased to play a marginal role and became increasingly central (Sawadogo 2013: 149). As Srinivasan (2008) points out, however, stronger relations between Khartoum and Beijing did not begin with oil exploration, but with increased arms sales, dating back to the early 1970s. Nonetheless, the rapid growth in Sino-Sudanese trade has undoubtedly occurred in connection with oil co-operation (Srinivasan 2008: 60). Beijing perceives Sudan as "the bridgehead to access the African oil market and the regional economy in Africa", so Sawadogo (2013), which is why Sudan has gained prominence in Chinese foreign policy (Sawadogo 2013: 152). Furthermore, China has continuously viewed Sudan as one of its most reliable allies in looking for energy to fuel its growing economy and sustain its international politics (Sawadogo 2013: 150). Observers have pointed out the asymmetrical economic relations between the two countries: to Sudan, its economic links to China are crucial, whereas to China's massive economy, Sudan is

of limited significance and can therefore, at best, only offer a partial explanation why Beijing initially protected the Sudanese government (Shinn 2009: 88. See also Large 2009: 616 and Shichor 2007).

It should be highlighted that the conventional claim that it was solely China's interest in Sudanese oil that led to China's reluctance about a humanitarian intervention is a too simplistic explanation, not least because Sudan, as an important source of oil in Africa, has been replaced by Angola and other producers, since the quality and production rate of its oil has been below expectations (Large 2008: 8. See also Sawadogo 2013: 155). It should also be pointed out that China is not Sudan's only economic partner. India, Malaysia, and Middle Eastern as well as Western countries have stakes in Sudan or have expressed interest in Sudanese oil reserves (Bradbury 2012/3: 398). As noted by Large (2008), China has also been involved in long-term projects in Sudan's infrastructure, construction, energy and transport sectors (Large 2008: 7).

4.3. International pressure

With Sudan and particularly the conflict in Darfur becoming a hot topic, China's Africa policy was put in the spotlight. Beijing found itself increasingly exposed to pressure from the international community (Sawadogo 2013: 150), Western powers and human rights groups. They accused China's adherence to its policy of non-interference of fuelling the crisis in Darfur (He 2010: 49).

In Budabin's (2011) opinion, it was only when "actors such as the US and the UN failed to compel other members of the international community to respond to the situation in Darfur, SDC (Save Darfur Coalition) advocates in the US began a campaign to target China." She

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argues that activists “identified China as a vulnerable target because it was an ally of the Sudanese government, its status was increasing in the international community, and it was hosting the Olympic Games in 2008.” (Budabin 2011: 139).

China’s leaders like to portray China as a responsible world power, so when international criticism over Beijing’s close ties to the Sudanese government became increasingly loud, this presented strong self-interested reasons to act (Bradbury 2012/3_ 384). However, even when China’s attitude vis-à-vis Khartoum underwent a significant change, its more constructive engagement did not retain Darfur activists in the US from continuing their attacks on China over its close ties with Sudan (Shinn 2009: 93). Mia Farrow, a well-known Hollywood actress and UNICEF goodwill ambassador, published an opinion piece in the *Wall Street Journal* in March 2007, stating that unless China changes its policies towards Sudan, it would be hosting a “Genocide Olympics” (Wall Street Journal, 2007). Even though the article was condemned by the Chinese leadership, it had quite some impact: in mid-February 2008, Steven Spielberg, whom the article had also accused of supporting the “Genocide Olympics” by not pressuring the Chinese government sufficiently, resigned as artistic director of the Olympic Games. He criticised China of failing to use its leverage on Sudan to make peace in Darfur (Lee, Chan, Chan 2011: 440). After the Beijing Olympics were successfully completed, the Save Darfur Coalition and other activists lost much of their steam (Shinn 2009: 93).

4.4. China’s dilemma over Darfur

As shown, Sudan plays an important role in Chinese foreign policy, especially since Sudan

is perceived by China as the bridgehead to access the African oil market and the regional economy in Africa. Therefore, it seems unlikely for China to readily give up its relations to Sudan. Additionally to finding itself under tremendous pressure from mainly Western powers, the Chinese government, when exposed to mounting external pressure to persuade Khartoum to resolve the conflict, was in itself not unanimous over its Darfur policy. Some officials urged the government not to abide to the pressure from Western countries while others “regarded Sudan as not worth damage to China’s international standing” (Lee, Chan, Chan 2011: 431).

International pressure on the one side and Sudan’s significance to China’s foreign policy on the other caused China to find itself increasingly caught in a dilemma, consisting of two aspects of Beijing’s diplomatic standards – a traditional emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference on the one hand, and the ambition to maintain good relations with other world powers on the other (Holslag 2007: 2). It was this dilemma that led to a turn in Beijing’s foreign policy attitude towards Khartoum, and that led to China’s move from its traditional policy of non-interference to a more active policy regarding Darfur.

5. China’s changing attitude vis-à-vis Khartoum: From “non-interference” to a more constructive engagement

The following section is dedicated to identifying and analysing the development of China’s attitude vis-à-vis Khartoum. It will discuss China’s changing relationship to the Sudanese government and its own understanding of the role it played in trying to end the conflict, and this role as perceived by other actors. It will thereby not go into full detail, but concentrate

on key moments central to the understanding of this development.

Starting from the outbreak of the conflict in Darfur in 2003 and ending in the year 2008, this section is divided into five parts and concludes with an overall assessment of China's role in the crisis.

5.1. Phase 1: 2003 - 2004: Full support of Khartoum

When the conflict in Darfur broke out in February 2003, China, it seems, anticipated that the Sudanese government would be able to handle the situation and bring the conflict to a swift end (Shichor 2007). The Sudanese leadership, who visited Beijing on several occasions during that time, conveyed false information about the state of affairs in Darfur, stating that the armed rebellion would, in a short time, be brought under control. China was requested to support the Sudanese government in opposing the emerging Western campaign on Darfur. Chinese officials were inclined to believe that the Sudanese government was in control of the situation. More importantly, in their opinion, this conflict was an internal affair that should be dealt with by the Sudanese government (Ahmed 2010: 6).

China's international patronage became particularly important in relation to Khartoum's external handling of the war in Darfur, with China delaying and diluting United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) that pressured Khartoum to end the hostilities (Large; Patey 2011: 189/90). China abstained on a number of resolutions of the UNSC, of which it is a permanent member (Bradbury 2012/3: 380), and threatened to use its veto to block these resolutions (Small Arms Survey, 2007). China also removed or tried to remove

any statements critical of Khartoum (Shinn 2009 91).

Beijing was concerned about a UN peacekeeping intervention without prior consent of the Sudanese government, as this posed a risk for the principles of its framework of conducting relations with Africa as a whole. The doctrine of non-interference has been a key factor in China's successful expansion in Africa; to deviate from this principle would lead to far-reaching consequences of China's Africa engagement (Large 2008: 8). Therefore, as from 2004, when several United Nations Security resolutions (UNSCR) calling for an external force for Darfur were issued, China opposed these resolutions by repeating the need to respect the principles of national sovereignty and non-interference (Bradbury 2012/3: 380).

5.2. Phase 2: 2004 - 2006: Gradual shift

By mid-2004, however, China had already begun to shift its position on Darfur and no longer offered unconditional support to the government in Sudan. This appears to have resulted from a combination of international pressure, that wanted to see China adopt a "responsible stakeholder" role in international affairs on the one hand, and tendencies within Chinese foreign policy circles that demanded a review of Chinese foreign policy and efforts in strengthening the co-operation with Western powers on the other (Ahmed 2010: 6). Another reason was China's realisation of the gap between Khartoum's official government rhetoric and the actual situation in Darfur (Ahmed 2010: 19).

Through visits of special envoys, China embarked on a diplomatic campaign to persuade the government in Khartoum to change its policy regarding Darfur. The objective of these

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visits was to urge the Sudanese government to improve the humanitarian situation in Darfur, put an end to the killings and make a real effort to solve the crisis, and to cease confronting the international community with an unyielding attitude. These pressures fell on deaf ears, however, and Khartoum continued with its aggressive policies in Darfur and kept up its support of the Janjaweed. Consequently, China, frustrated with the Sudanese governments' unwillingness to co-operate, supported Western countries in exerting more pressure on Khartoum (Ahmed 2010: 7). It did, however, keep up its habit of abstaining on UNSC resolutions (Shinn 2009: 91)⁵, for example on the resolution of March 2005 that referred the situation in Darfur to the International Criminal Court (ICC) (Shinn 2009: 91). Wang Guangya 王光亚, the Chinese ambassador to the UN, stated that the Chinese government "would have preferred that the perpetrators stand trial in Sudanese courts, which had recently taken action against people involved in human rights violations in Darfur. China did not favour the referral to the International Criminal Court without the consent of the Sudanese Government" (Sudan Tribune, 2008). Clearly, at this point, China viewed the conflict in Darfur as a purely internal affair that should be left to the Sudanese government to deal with without outside impact. "Business is Business", said Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Zhou Wenzhong 周文重 in 2005, "we try to separate politics from business [...] the in-

ternal situation in Sudan is an internal affair" (Holslag 2007: 3).

5.3. Phase 3: 2006: New phase of direct Chinese pressure

Growing calls for shifting support away from Khartoum and aligning closer with Western countries and the international community emerged increasingly from within the CCP and state institutions concerned with the issue. Thenceforth a new phase of direct Chinese pressure began, since China had come to realize that any approach of reconciliation or quiet diplomacy were not bearing fruit when dealing with the Sudanese government (Ahmed 2009: 8). Beijing's support for the deployment of a UN peacekeeping mission for Darfur, which was strongly opposed by the Sudanese President Al-Bashir in particular, was the most prominent area where China engaged in its own form of behind-the-scenes-pressure politics (large 2009: 619); on August 31, 2006, China abstained in a vote that turned the African presence in Darfur to a comprehensive international presence. This resolution angered Sudanese officials, who rejected the idea of replacing the AU (African Union) forces and saw it as "an attempt by the West to re-occupy the Sudan" (People's Daily Online, 2006. See also Ahmed 2010: 8). Nafi Ali Nafi, the assistant and advisor to the president of Sudan and deputy president for political affairs of the ruling National Congress Party (NCP), openly criticised China by asking, "why is China waiting to use the right of veto in the face of unfair resolutions that target its friends?" (Ahmed 2010: 8).

In light of the Sudanese government's defiance, China and the US initiated a compromise solution for a hybrid UN-AU force in November 2006, which was eventually but grudgingly ac-

⁵ China continued to abstain from votes until 2007. On July 30, 2004, China abstained on a UNSC resolution demanding the disarmament of the Janjaweed, one in September of the same year that called for a commission of inquiry to investigate human rights violations on Darfur, and another one in March 2005 requesting to impose sanctions against those responsible for committing violence in Darfur (Shinn 2009: 91).

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cepted by Khartoum (Lee, Chan, Chan 2011: 439). The US special envoy to Sudan, Andrew Natsios, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Chinese “have been largely supportive of our efforts to resolve the Darfur situation through peaceful means and have been publicly encouraging Khartoum” to allow AU and UN peacekeepers into Darfur (Shinn 2009: 92).

Chinese diplomacy became noticeably more engaged, through public statements about the need for ceasefire, individual diplomatic visits to Sudan and Darfur to pressure for resolution, as well as through attempts to mediate a compromise deal in peace negotiations (Bradbury 2012/3: 381).

5.4. Turning point: 2007

Many scholars view the year 2007 as a turning point in Chinese foreign policy. Two main events heralded the change in China’s attitude towards Sudan and the international community. The first, deemed by most scholars as the most significant, was Hu Jintao’s 胡锦涛⁶ visit to Khartoum in February 2007. During his visit, the now former Chinese president urged his Sudanese counterpart for acceptance of the UN peacekeeping forces and co-operation with the international community and the UNSC (Ahmed 2010: 9). Hu Jintao made use of his visit to Khartoum to establish four principles⁷ for handling the crisis in Darfur (Shinn 2009: 92). While these principles are under-

lined by state sovereignty, they acknowledge the need to improve the living conditions of the civil population, which indicates an evolution of official discourse beyond solely state directed language. Some regarded this new line of discourse as a turning point in the unravelling of China’s Sudan diplomacy (Bradbury 2012/3: 381) and as an indication that China was unable to take a stand against the Western position at the UNSC (Ahmed 2010:). Shichor (2007) argues that these principles are evidence for Beijing’s concern that “US-led efforts to stop human rights abuses in Sudan (and elsewhere) could at some point be directed at China itself.” (Shichor 2007).

A second climax of the new Chinese policy towards Darfur was reached on May 11 in 2007 when Liu Guijin 刘贵今, the former ambassador to Zimbabwe and South Africa, was appointed as a Chinese special envoy to Darfur (Ahmed 2010: 9). This appointment appears to have been a part of China’s efforts to “redress the damage to its image and contribute to attempted solutions” (Bradbury 2012/3: 381). By making this appointment, China acknowledged that it had become concerned over the harm to its image resulting from its relationship with Sudan in the context of Darfur (Shinn 2009: 92).

Behind this public shift in China’s stance were a number of causes, including the fact that some leaders of the European Union (EU) raised the possibility of boycotting the Beijing Olympics in the summer of 2008. A message sent by 108 members of the US Congress to the Chinese president calling on him to press Sudan to take some serious steps to stop the violence in Darfur (Ahmed 2010: 9/10) appears to have been another driving factor.

⁶ Hu Jintao was President of the People’s Republic of China from 2003 to 2013.

⁷ The four principles are: (1) to respect Sudan’s sovereignty and territorial integrity; (2) to resolve the issue by peaceful means and by sticking to dialogue and coordination based on equality; (3) the African Union and the UN should play constructive roles in a peacekeeping mission in Darfur; and (4) to improve the situation in Darfur and the living conditions of the local people. See Lee, Chan, Chan 2011: 435.

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5.5. Phase 4: 2007- 2008: China closer to the West than to Sudan?

When China began to increasingly distance itself from its initial backing of Khartoum, the Sudanese government tried to win back its support, especially by playing the Chinese oil interest card. China, however, replied by repeating its insistence that Sudan should accept the intervention of the UN peacekeeping forces and help facilitate their task. When the violence in Darfur deepened once more, China joined Western countries in publicly pressuring Sudan and in July 2007 voted in favour of an UNSC resolution that authorised the UN to send a peacekeeping force of 26,000 to Darfur (Ahmed 2010: 10). Although China “worked behind the scenes to reduce the negative impact of the resolution on Sudan, it ultimately supported the landmark initiative”, so Shinn (2009). China was among the first countries to contribute peacekeepers to the United Nations African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) (Shinn 2009: 93), thereby demonstrating its desire to resolve the conflict by peaceful means. Liu Guijin confronted the Sudanese minister of foreign affairs, Deng Alor, at the African Summit on January 31, 2008 in Addis Ababa with China’s anxiety over the state of affairs in Darfur, letting him know that “the patience of the international community has started to run out about what is happening in Darfur” (Shinn 2009: 93). After the African Summit, he visited Khartoum, where he warned that China was unable to oppose measures such as economic boycotts, wide-ranging military embargo against Sudan due to Khartoum’s lack of co-operation with the international community (Ahmed 2009: 10). On January 10, 2008, Liu Guijin gave a rare public statement on the subject when he stated that “the co-operation of China with states such as Sudan does not necessarily

mean its approval of offences against human rights there... the Chinese government doesn’t support any massacre committed by the Sudanese government against its people (China Daily report, 2008. See also Ahmed 2010: 10). Liu’s statements indicate that “the patience of the Chinese government had actually ran out, just as the patience of the international community had run out some time before”, as Ahmed (2010) puts it (Ahmed 2010: 10).

China’s approach to Khartoum was increasingly marked by public concern and criticism. Liu, after his visit to Sudan, stated that Darfur was in a disastrous humanitarian state (China Daily report, 2008).⁸ An important step was taken shortly afterwards, when China offered to take up a mediating role between the rebels and the Khartoum government (Ahmed 2010: 12). However, China was not successful in this mediation role, as it was not able to establish balanced relations with all the key political forces involved in the conflict (Ahmed 2010: 20). Nonetheless, at this stage of the crisis, the Chinese stance appears to have been closer to that of the West than that of the Sudanese government.

6. Outlook

This paper has focussed on China’s shift in its traditional foreign policies in the context of the conflict in Darfur. Further topics worth investigating may include the evaluation of how much leverage China had *de facto* on Khartoum, as the literature concerned with this topic is not unanimous. Also, it would certainly be fruitful

⁸ Original quote: 最近在西达尔富尔地区，人道和治安形势确实有所恶化。(Zuìjìn zài xī dá'ěr fù ěr dìqū, réndào hé zhì'ān xíngshì quèshí yǒu suǒ èhuà; In the West Darfur region recently, the humanitarian and security situation has indeed deteriorated.)

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to have an overall analysis of China's engagement in Sudan beyond the context of Darfur, given that in June 2011, Sudan became two independent entities. Another interesting question worth exploring would be whether China's shift in the context of its traditional policy of non-interference in Darfur represented an exception or whether China is indeed chartering new waters in its approach to foreign diplomacy.

7. Conclusion

In the West, it was widely assumed that the major obstacle to ending the atrocities in Darfur was Beijing's political support of Khartoum, but, as has become evident in the course of this research, this belief was only partially grounded. Another conventional claim that merely China's interest in Sudanese oil led to China's reluctance about a humanitarian intervention has also proven to be a too simplistic explanation.

China's approach to foreign policy, which differs greatly from that of its Western counterparts, invoked a lot of international criticism; however, when over time China moved closer to the pre-existing conventions of foreign diplomacy, such reproaches were heard less and less. The motives behind China's transformation of its approach to foreign policy have shown to be highly complex and far from straightforward. Certain factors, some more weighty than others, have become evident. These include China's economic and political interests in Sudan, its desire to uphold good relations with the international community and to demonstrate its new place as a major power in the world. To ensure a successful Beijing Olympics in 2008 despite calls for a boycott appears to have also played a central role in this shift.

While in general China seems to have balanced its interests fairly successfully, and found a middle way out of its dilemma over Darfur, the conflict in Darfur has not, to this day, been resolved – not by the country's own government, the Chinese government, any Western government, UN peacekeeping forces, or any campaign to “save” Darfur. Therefore, instead of each party using up all its energies criticising other stakeholders, it ultimately is ever more important that all parties work together to finally resolve this seemingly intractable conflict.

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