

## **Do we really want China to be a responsible stakeholder in global affairs?**

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North Korea's recent provocations – showing Western scientists a new uranium enrichment facility and launching a deadly artillery barrage at South Korea – may soon be considered by the United Nations Security Council. That would provide a test for the Council – and for its only permanent Asian member, China.

The last such test occurred in March, when North Korea sank the South Korean corvette Cheonan, with 46 fatalities. Beijing made the implausible claim that Pyongyang's responsibility was unproven. US and South Korean naval maneuvers off the Korean peninsula followed, but Chinese diplomatic maneuvers in New York confined the Security Council's response to a weak statement from its president.

Thus the international organization's response to the unprovoked sinking of a warship with substantial loss of life – a definite threat to international peace and security, one would have thought – was a presidential statement that did not even directly name the attacker. This was bad for the credibility of the United Nations; but it was worse for the credibility of China.

China has its reasons for giving succor to its North Korean ally, and they are not all historical. It is anxious to avoid a collapsed state on its eastern border – or, for that matter, a strong state on its eastern border in the form of a reunified Western-aligned Korea. Yet is North Korea a worthy burden for Beijing to carry especially given the thickness of China's economic ties with South Korea and Japan? Who wants to live next to an unhinged, family-owned regime that, sooner or later, will go under? A Chinese strategist described the choice to me starkly: "North Korea is the bad guy and South Korea is the good guy. China has to be on the right side of history."

North Korea fits the pattern of China's broader UN relationship. In the past quarter-century, China has become a more skillful player in New York, represented by abler diplomats and behaving with more confidence in the Security Council chamber. Yet its approach to difficult security issues often seems more suited to a poor country than a great power.

Beijing regularly teams up with Moscow to weaken action in the Security Council relating to Iran's nuclear program, thereby privileging its short-term commercial relationship with the Iranians over its long-term interest in a stable Middle East and a functioning nuclear non-proliferation regime. It provides cover in the Security Council to states widely regarded as pariahs, such as Sudan and Burma (Myanmar). On the other hand, on issues that do not trespass directly on its core interests, for example Afghanistan, China remains strangely disengaged.

In other words, it is occupied largely with protecting its narrowly-defined interests and those of its allies rather than projecting its influence.

China wants respect, but not responsibility. It is reluctant to bind its own freedom of movement and subsume it within international institutions in the way the United States did after the Second World War, even though Washington's relative power was far greater than Beijing's is now.

None of this is to say that China's interests coincide exactly with Western interests. They do not, and we should not expect China to act exactly as we do. Nor should we ask China to promote global interests at the expense of its national interests. But as China's wealth and power grow, its interests expand. A middle-power foreign policy is inadequate for a great power.

If China is to help run the international system, it must help strengthen the international system. Beijing needs to strike a new balance between its traditional economic and security concerns and the broader imperatives it must now satisfy, including stable great-power relations, nonproliferation, and the development of international prestige. China's UN performance has largely escaped scrutiny in the past two decades, with the world's head turned by American power and then American overreach. That pattern will not hold, as China may well discover in coming days.

On the other hand, the West needs to be careful what it wishes for. Western capitals want Beijing to be more responsible and active, but they don't like it when Beijing is more assertive. China's version of "stepping up" at the UN will not necessarily be the same as the West's. How would Washington feel about China involving itself in the Middle East peace process, for example, or establishing "coalitions of the willing" in order to intervene in another country?

World Bank president and former Bush administration official Robert Zoellick famously called on China to be a "responsible stakeholder." In its performance at the UN, China has so far failed to clear that bar. China's leaders would probably respond that the responsibilities – and prerogatives – of a stakeholder are open to interpretation.

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