

Chinese Involvement In Somalia: Policy Change or Status Quo?

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LUKE BUTCHER, JUN 15 2011

During the 2000's, the role of China in international organisations has undergone a significant shift. As China has grown to become the 2nd largest economy in the world in recent times this will ultimately have an effect on China's standing in international relations and its involvement in conflicts around the world. Within this essay I will argue that the Chinese leadership is showing signs that in the future they are more likely to participate in interventions or international action outside of Chinese sovereign territory. I will illustrate this point by looking at the case of Chinese involvement in anti-piracy missions off the coast of Somalia. Currently this mission includes naval forces from around 20 states. For the first time China has deployed naval vessels away from the Chinese coastline and has participated with the European Union and the USA in a joint naval force within 'Operation Atalanta.' (Treves, 2010, p. 407) Although this mission has been relatively small in size with only 2 flotillas at a time participating in the mission, its importance has not gone understated. A high ranking Chinese official has said "the Chinese Navy's involvement will also show that China is a major responsible power willing to cooperate multilaterally." (Haizhou & Guangjin, 2010) I believe that the small role played by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is a sign of a willingness of the Chinese leadership to play a bigger role in multilateral operations far from Chinese soil. This paper will present this argument in two sections. Firstly I will analyse China's past stance on international interventions and how China has been expected to react to conflicts and issues around the world in Section One. China has been a keen proponent of state sovereignty over any intervention and this section will look at the reasons for this stance and its effects. Section Two will then go on to look at how this has evolved in recent times with the changing nature of China's role in international relations, including the Chinese mission in Somalia. This second section will also look at what this means for the future of Chinese involvement in conflicts and interventions around the world. The paper will finish by summing up the main conclusions of the essay.

Section One

Since the People's Republic of China took up its seat in the UN Security Council (UNSC) in 1971 China has been a serious player when negotiating and dealing with international conflicts not because of its activity in this role, but rather its passivity. The Chinese leadership and some scholars argue that China has played an important role in protecting the sovereignty of all nations, something enshrined in the UN charter. They argue that "It speaks out on principles of non-interference, thereby helping the world's poor to resist the world's rich" because in most cases of conflict intervention it is the rich western nations intervening in the affairs of poorer nations. (Austin, 2001, p. 55) In addition to this "China's burgeoning involvements in UN peacekeeping activities in Cambodia in 1992 and operations in Kuwait, Palestine, Liberia, and the Western Sahara have enhanced its image as 'good international citizens.'" (Austin, 2001, p. 55) These involvements however were not in a military sense and China has looked to gain support of the third world nations by being perceived as the 'good international citizen' Austin describes. This emphasis on non-intervention has led to the attempted blocking of UN involvements in the internal conflicts that sprung up around the world after the end of the cold war. China blocked any direct action in Haiti in 1991, seriously questioned French involvement in Rwanda in 1994, prevented UNPREDEP in Macedonia in 1995 from effective by using the veto against the use of force and also refused to sanction any use of force by the UNSC against Yugoslavia in the case of Kosovo until the end of 1998. (Bellamy, Williams, & Griffin, 2004)[1] This shows the strong resistance China has put up since the end of the cold war to any intervention in conflicts in different regions of the world.

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Many scholars would argue that despite the rhetoric from Beijing, one of the main reasons for this emphasis on sovereignty in the global arena is that China is seeking to protect its own sovereignty in disputed territories. As Anna Kent argues:

“Emphasis on sovereignty is, moreover, a reflection of the extent to which China’s international interaction carries with it considerable domestic, normative costs... In China’s case, international cooperation and interdependence often conflict with the perceived needs of domestic stability, with the authority of Party leaders and with the norms of domestic culture.” (Kent, 2001, p. 139)

These domestic issues are vital to China’s stance on intervention. China has a number of territorial disputes, most notably in Tibet, which Beijing regards as an internal issue. Alongside this China would not like to be seen involved in an intervention that supports the overthrow of an unelected regime in the knowledge this could give rise to the democratic movement within China itself and could encourage other nations to become involved in China’s political affairs in the future. This means that China does not want “to concede too much authority to UN agencies, which might take on a peace-keeping role and thereby create a precedent that could lead to intervention in other countries’ affairs, including those of China itself.” (Ferdinand, 1995, p. 35) These are the perceived needs of domestic stability that have underpinned Chinese insistence on sovereignty whilst they have been a permanent member of the UNSC. This would lead us to expect China to continue its insistence on non-intervention whilst these norms remain and whilst China has these internal concerns.

The effects on the international community of this Chinese policy towards intervention have been very important. It has resulted in an increased difficulty in passing interventionist actions within the UN. The risk a Chinese veto and the support China has from third world countries makes China a serious force of non-intervention within the UN. It has also led to a number of accusations from the other UNSC members that China does not contribute enough considering its status and power. They have noted that “China also has a tendency to free-ride where possible and to exploit its developing nation status. Thus, for instance, although a member of the permanent five, China’s contribution rate to the United Nation’s regularly budget is below 1 per cent.” (Kent, 2001, p. 137) This very low contribution and the perception that China free-rides on the security actions of other nations has been prevalent since the 1990’s when China became increasingly developed. Despite these issues the Chinese representation in the UNSC has not been one of consistent UN infighting. It can be seen that “although the PRC has had serious disagreements with other permanent members of the UN Security Council over issues such as the crisis in Yugoslavia... by and large the PRC has been cooperative.” (Ferdinand, 1995, p. 35) Usually China has been able to negotiate and compromise with the other UNSC members over interventions.

From this analysis it is possible to predict that Chinese non-interventionism will continue whilst Chinese internal concerns over its own sovereignty and government issues continue. Although the leadership will remain non-interventionist it will be willing to compromise and negotiate its position, attempting to build on its reputation as a ‘good international citizen’ amongst the small countries within the UN. However, this position and expectation of China we have seen throughout the 1990’s and most of the 2000’s is undergoing some forms of change. The next section will look at how the forces that drive non-intervention in the leadership are now being affected by China’s economic growth, its increased power in international politics and its pursuit of strategic resources in third world countries using increased aid to smaller nations.

Section Two

More recently there has been a revision of the role that China could potentially play in interventions and conflicts around the world. This has firstly been driven by the economic rise of China and its pursuit of power in international relations. As the economy has boomed, so has the defence budget. Between 1995 and 2004 China’s official defence budget has increased by 233% and the actual expenditure has increased by 166%. Between 2001 and 2004 the budget as a percentage of GDP has risen from 4.0% to 6.1%. Although this does not match the budget of the US, it is an important rise. (Levin, 2008, p. 36) This means China certainly has a growing capability to mobilise forces in more and more locations. Although the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is not close to reaching the levels of the US military funding, the growth of the military budget in China is a signal that the PLA could grow into a capable and modern

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fighting force. The second force that is driving a change in the expected stance of China in relation to intervention is its drive for resources and relations with African nations. Chinese FDI into Africa rose from around \$4bn to around \$9bn between 2007 and 2008 and the imports of mineral fuels and ores from Africa into China reached nearly \$34bn in 2009. However, the arms China exported to Africa remains around the same level as Belarus. (Financial Times, 2010, p. 1)[2] This tells us an important aspect about China's relations with the African states. These nations can supply the crucial resources that China's ever growing economy needs whilst China can provide the investment the ailing economies of Africa desperately require, all of this without the political dealing that comes with negotiations with the west. This approach has been described as a "see no evil" economic approach, which is important because:

"The strength of China's African relations and the source of much of its soft power stems from more than just the relatively recent growth in trade and investment... Technical support, without political 'strings attached' (other than the affirmation of a 'one China policy') has remained a significant aspect of China's support for African states." (Thompson, 2005, p. 2)

This means that China now has an increasing interest in these African nations, and means an increased likelihood of intervention to protect the million dollars of investment China has pumped into Africa and the natural resources Beijing has been promised.

An increasingly capable PLA and increased involvement in Africa has culminated in China's first naval exercise off the coast of Somalia. Even since 1995 there has been "Chinese observers in several UN peacekeeping operations in different continents of the world." (Ferdinand, 1995, p. 35) In addition "The principle of non-interference does not mean that China rejects political and economic reform per se in Africa." (Thompson, 2005, p. 2) The main interest China has in the region is to make sure its aid and development assistance in the region is protected. With the dramatic increase in the cases of piracy in off the coast of Somalia in the Gulf of Aden costing the global economy up to \$16 billion a year[3], the risk to Chinese ships has increased and there has been numerous attempts, some successful, on Chinese ships since 2007.[4] This has resulted in the PLAN joining 20 nations in providing protection for trade vessels in the region. China believes that "(It) sends a strong political message to the international community that China with its improved economic and military strength is willing to play a larger role in maintaining world peace and security." (AFP, 2008) I believe that this is a signal that the time has come that China has begun to seriously consider interventions in areas in which its own interests are under threat. This is important not just because it means an increasing likelihood of Chinese intervention, but it may also improve relations with other nations. There is evidence that "China's involvement in international organisations is very important because it both creates a more balanced community and socialises China into international norms." (Kent, 2001, p. 133) The work done between the European lead Operation Atalanta and the PLAN could be the beginning of an improved relationship where China could provide assistance in interventions such as the one in Somalia in the future.

I believe that the operation in Somalia has shown it is certainly perceivable that China will become embroiled in further interventions and conflicts around the world. It is not simply in Africa that Beijing's power is increasing, as:

"Emerging from a shell of defensive diplomacy dating back decades, China suddenly is engaging with the world, wooing friends with a subtle, softer approach, and using its popularity to make gains, even as America's popularity around the world was plummeting. In Africa, newly popular China is winning oil and gas deals; in Latin America, China is signing strategic partnerships; in the Philippines, Chinese films are making inroads against American movies." (Kurlantzick, 2007, p. ix)

This more outward looking China has interests that are more spread out across the world and protecting these interests could see China moving into interventionism. There is evidence that this could certainly be helpful for the UN and its role in peacekeeping. Currently the UN tends to delegate peacekeeping roles to regional organisations around the world. However, this raises an issue of "the prospect of a two-tier peacekeeping." The first tier is a set of operations that are well funded, well trained and led by the US and its core allies. The second is under-funded, barely trained, divided and unable to solve the long term issues. (Bellamy, Williams, & Griffin, 2004, p. 275) If China becomes more heavily involved and increases its current 1% input into the UN budget as well as increasing its economic aid and trade with third world countries then this could help alleviate this issue. Also, China could become

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an increasingly important partner in fighting piracy in Somalia. China was involved alongside Japan in the scaling down of the piracy closer to home. In South East Asia they were able to “offer their people a way out of poverty.” (Young, 2007, p. 116) Many scholars have noted how this approach was successful and that rather than focusing on security, states should be helping solve the causes not the symptoms of piracy. (Young, 2007, p. 116) The approach of China in Africa of providing a huge amount of trade and aid with very little strings attached could be the tonic in Somalia. The political demands and arming of militias that came with aid in Somalia during the cold war was one of the causes of the current issue, and the rebuilding of the economy separate of political concerns would be one way to eliminate poverty and therefore the cause of piracy.

However there should be a note of caution. Although an increased amount of participation in international organizations can help bring China and the western nations in the UNSC closer together, there is no guarantee this will mean smoother agreements between the countries over future interventions. As shown by the recent crisis in Libya, China will continue to negotiate its position and bring about compromise. There should be caution that “while routine activities in international organizations help stabilise the nature of China’s participation, international bodies of a more political character often reflect the volatility of its policy shifts.” (Kent, 2001, p. 139) In deciding upon whether to become involved in interventions like those in Somalia “China is increasingly trying to balance out its national interests and its international obligations.” (Austin, 2001, p. 61) This may mean a long time before we see a sizable Chinese contribution or use of force in interventions around the world. In fact the position of negotiation rather than blocking interventions can be seen as one of advantage, as “its power is enhanced by its preparedness to negotiate its sovereignty, rather than to impose blanket vetos.” (Kent, 2001, p. 155) Therefore the evidence suggests we are likely to see a change in Chinese international intervention involvement similar to the development in its domestic politics, with trade and economy leading the way. China will continue to chase resources and invest heavily around the world whilst attempting to remain non-interventionist, but it may prove impossible for China not to become embroiled in some form of intervention like that in Somalia.

Conclusion

In conclusion I believe that the Chinese involvement in Somalia, however small it may be, is a sign that that the non-interventionist approaches adopted by China since the end of the cold war is now clashing with its increased interests in other areas of the world, particularly in Africa. As Chinese influence grows so does the likelihood that Beijing’s increased trade and investment in areas of potential conflict will mean China will be drawn in to intervene in order to protect its own investments, trade, aid and natural resources. The evidence points to the fact that “China is becoming strong, or has the potential to become very strong. In parallel with its growing strength, China is increasingly involved in world affairs.” (Austin, 2001, p. 60) This process will inevitably take time, as Beijing’s desire to protect and enshrine the sovereignty it has promoted over the years vigorously in the UN wrestles with the new found strength, influence and interest across the globe. Ultimately though there will come a time when the need to intervene in conflicts will overcome, and the leadership will have to decide whether to act within the UN and other agencies or go alone to protect its interest. There remains hope that “China’s need for moral stature and a good international reputation thus helps tone down the realism of its foreign policy”, meaning that “despite the cost it incurs, it continues to support international organisations and multilateralism... just as the world needs China, China needs the world.” (Kent, 2001, p. 156) More cooperation with other missions like the operation in Somalia is a step in the right direction.

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[1] The book discusses Haiti (Pages 159-162), Rwanda (Pages 223-225), UNPREDEP (Pages 265-267) and the Kosovo crisis (Pages 221-223)

[2] Figures taken here are given in US Dollars

[3] This figure is taken from an estimate from (Gilpin, 2009, p. 13). The rest of the report carries a breakdown of the costs of Somali piracy.

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[4] These attempts include an attempt on the Zhenhua ship in 2008 (The Telegraph Foreign Staff, 2008), A fishing vessel in 2009 (Reuters, 2009) and a China bound oil tanker in 2010 (BBC, 2010)

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