

China and the UN Security Council in 2010

Rodrigo Manuel Hernández Segovia*

When the United Nations was created after World War II and later for a large part of the twentieth century, the reasons for including China among the select group of powers that would forge the new international order were highly questioned. That is, why it was made one of the five permanent members of the Security Council after its participation in the war against the Axis had been very marginal and its economic weight did not justify giving it the privilege of a permanent seat.

Today we understand that Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, well advised in geostrategy and geopolitics, realized the grave risk they would have been taking by leaving China out of the United Nations order. It is possible that it was more a strategy to contain the Soviet threat, in addition to the fact that the United Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR) had a glimmer of the risk of sharing an enormous border with this demographic and territorial giant.

No matter what the reason for including China in this power group, today, its reality probably far surpasses predictions from 65 years ago about its economic, political, and demographic power and growth. It now accounts for more than one-fifth the world's population; it is the world's foremost manufacturing power and has the largest reserve of foreign currency. This year, it is already the world's number two economy, surpassing Japan and second only to the United States, at the same time that in the years of global financial and economic crisis, it has continued to grow at more than 8 percent a year. In addition, it is the world's third largest military power, after the United States and the Russian Federation.

All this indicates that, like it or not, China is a decisive actor in international relations, with muscle that at least for

now tends to grow. The Western powers, particularly the United States, are perfectly aware of this. So, questions arise like: What are China's plans? Where is it going? Does it plan to consolidate itself as a hegemonic power, or is it just an emerging power whose growth rate will not be sustainable for more than 20 or 30 years? In any case, these questions aside, the United States already perceives China's rivalry and opposition in several spheres and scenarios; this has even led many scholars of international relations to consider the possibility that a new bi-polar world is emerging.

Let us remember that Zbigniew Brzezinski, one of the great ideologues of U.S. power in Barack Obama's administration, proposed the concept of "G2" as the new scenario for understanding and coexistence between today's two great powers.¹ China, however, does not seem to like this approach, since it does not want to be perceived as a hegemonic power or as a threat involved in what was once the U.S.-Soviet rivalry. Until today, China has preferred "multi-polarity" as the most viable scenario for opening the way for its growth and development interests.

Beginning in the 1970s, China sought to distance itself from Soviet tutelage and become a protagonist as a member of the Third World. Today, basing itself on a political and numerical calculation, it is betting on its alliances with the emerging powers and the developing countries. China's discourse identifies itself as part of the developing world, as an emerging economic power, but not as a developed country as yet. To a great extent, this has been its negotiating chip for successfully approaching many countries like those in Africa, with which it maintains very fruitful trade relations.

China has had to adjust and adapt to the rules of a system created by the Western powers. One way or another, Roosevelt and Churchill fulfilled their aim of keeping Chi-

* Professor at the UNAM School of Political and Social Sciences, rodrigo_sgar@yahoo.com.mx.

For China, the United Nations is a very good negotiating platform, where it tries to project a peaceful, friendly image. It needs the UN, so until now it has been respectful of it, at least more than the United States.

na aligned and to a certain extent limited by the rules of the international order created by the United States and its allies. However, for China, the United Nations is a very good negotiating platform, since what it is looking for is to project a peaceful, friendly image. It knows that it needs the UN, and this is why until now it has been respectful of it, at least more than the United States.

China has been capable of making use of its status as a permanent member of the Security Council with its veto power, although it is the country that has used it the least in the history of council negotiations. This means that it has been capable of negotiating and playing its cards well, since most of the time it has only threatened to use it.

Today, in a Security Council headed by Mexico, China's clear priority is its national security. Of the large number of topics on the negotiating table, I will refer here particularly to the sanctions against Iran and Darfur because they are the issues on which China has shown itself to be a major player and has had more impact on the negotiations, since they are very important to its interests.

It is common knowledge that Iran's nuclear program and the UN sanctions against the regime of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad have been priorities on Barack Obama's foreign policy agenda. For several months, the United States, together with France, England, and Germany, has been negotiating with Security Council permanent and non-permanent members about the sanctions that should be applied to the Iran government given its non-conciliatory position and refusal to halt its uranium enrichment program.

While negotiations have moved forward —China did vote in favor of the fourth round of sanctions imposed on Iran— there is great uncertainty about whether China is really willing to back these sanctions in practice. Up until now, there is nothing to assure us that it will. We should remember that, since the end of the Cold War, China's negotiating style has been characterized by taking positions that do not commit it completely to any of the parties. During the



Jessica Rinaldi/REUTERS

U.S.-Soviet conflict, this was known as a “triangular strategy” or casuistical behavior.

For now, in his attempt to not make an enemy of Washington and to be seen as conciliatory inside the UN, President Hu Jintao has accepted Barack Obama and Hilary Clinton's requests that he back the sanctions against the Ahmadinejad regime, but many reasons suggest that in practice, he might not back them up: for example, Iran is a key to China's energy security. Today, China buys 400,000 barrels of oil a day from Iran, 11 percent of its net oil imports.² After Saudi Arabia, Iran is its second-largest oil supplier.

Nevertheless, many factors lead us to believe that China's best option will be to back the U.S.-proposed sanctions. Barack Obama has warned China about the Iranian nuclear program's threat to Israel's security and the possible preventive measure Israel could take against Iran. In addition, Israeli's defense minister traveled to Beijing last April to ask for Chinese government support for sanctions against Iran. He was very clear that if there were no sanctions, Israel would not hesitate to attack Iran's nuclear installations, oil deposits, and petroleum extraction infrastructure on which China's supply depends. So, China will have to ponder several factors.

Allowing the Iranian nuclear program to continue will increasingly jack up the tension in the Middle East. China is the party least interested in an outbreak of war in the region be-

China does not want to be perceived as a hegemonic power or threat involved in the old U.S.-Soviet rivalry. It has preferred “multi-polarity” as the most viable scenario for its growth and development interests.

cause, among many other consequences, that would undoubtedly hike up oil prices and China would be the most severely affected. For the moment, it seems in China’s best interest to decrease its energy dependency on Iran, strengthening its presence and influence in other oil-rich countries like the Sudan, and maintaining good relations with the United States, avoiding getting caught up in a political confrontation.

Another especially important issue for Security Council negotiations in which China has a big say is Darfur. Mexico has expressed its interest in advancing this point on the council’s agenda during its presidency, since it is central to human rights, an issue Mexico has particularly stated it wants to emphasize.

The situation in Darfur is already quite well known, as is China’s position on it. The Asian giant has refused to recognize the gravity of the genocide the Sudanese government has perpetrated in the region. Since 2004 when an arms embargo was imposed on the Sudan, China has been one of the main suppliers of small and light arms to the Khartoum government, presumably until then the second largest supplier after the Russian Federation. But since 2004, 90 percent of the small arms in the Sudan come from China.³

Oil will once again be a key factor in relations between China and the Sudan. Just like in Iran, China’s national oil companies have important investments in the Sudan in oil extraction. In 2008, the China National Petroleum Corporation, one of the Chinese state’s main oil companies, controlled almost 70 percent of the Sudan’s oil production. In 2008, earnings from oil sales came to 80 percent of the Sudan’s total income. That same year, the Sudan earmarked 45 percent of that income for military spending, which has been that government’s priority since 2001.⁴ So, China is in a win-win business in the Sudan: it invests in infrastructure to extract oil; it buys Sudanese oil at very accessible prices; and it supplies the Khartoum government with arms, which it buys from the profit it makes from oil sales to China.

With these kinds of interests in play, it is only to be expected that China will continue to stay on the sidelines.

Particularly on the issue of Darfur, China carts out its “non-interventionist” foreign policy stance. Criticisms of China for its indifference to the genocide in Darfur have been numerous and severe. They seemed to begin to bother it particularly in 2008, when it hosted the Olympic Games. Since then, China has considered reversing its stance on Darfur.

One of the instruments it has used has been the Peacekeeping Operations (PKOs), specifically the African Union-United Nations Mission in Darfur (UNAMID). Initially, China criticized the PKOs, calling them instruments for interventionism by the great powers. However, it has realized that the PKOs are a good way of acquiring international prestige and a good image as a country. China sees its participation in the UNAMID as an opportunity to make up in large part for its tolerance of the Khartoum government’s human rights violations.

Since 2008, China has contributed US\$3.5 million to the UNAMID. In 2009, it was the fourteenth largest contributor in military, civilian, and police personnel to UN peacekeeping operations. It is the largest contributor of the five permanent members of the Security Council, and in the specific case of the UNAMID, China has deployed 325 troops.⁵ While in financial terms, China makes only a very marginal contribution, its increasing involvement in peacekeeping missions has greatly helped improve its image as an emerging power, above all in Africa and very particularly in the Sudan.

Another issue involving Darfur that will have to be dealt with in the Security Council during Mexico’s presidency, given that the fundamental issue it wants to focus on is human rights, is the detention of President Omar al-Bashir. On this issue, the Security Council is facing an enormous challenge: making sure those responsible for the “ethnic cleansing” perpetrated in Darfur do not go unpunished and that the International Criminal Court really functions as an international legal institution. In that vein, one of the main obstacles is once again China, since it has said it is not willing to cooperate in detaining Al-Bashir. The issue is further complicated if we consider that neither the African Union as a whole nor the Arab countries have expressed willingness to cooperate in his arrest.

We should also remember that China has important political and trade alliances with both groups of countries and nothing forces it to participate in the detention of President Al Bashir, since it is not a signatory of the Rome Statute:⁶ from the beginning it was one of the countries that opposed the creation of an International Criminal Court. Taking all this

into account, the arrest of Omar al-Bashir is very problematic, but must continue to be a priority on the Security Council agenda.

Clearly, then, China is a global power with important interests to defend at several latitudes across the globe. To do that, it will make use of the complex, broad set of alliances it has forged down through recent years. Just as in the past, today it is impossible to assess a country's power without taking into consideration its web of alliances throughout the world. China understands that it cannot emerge alone, and therefore it has been working to establish good relations on the seven continents. For now, it will have to move ahead in a "multipolar" world, as it likes to call it, but recognizing that there are issues pivotal to its security about which —like it or not— it will have to seek a consensus with the United States. **NM**

NOTES

¹ The term "Group of Two (G2)," originally coined by C. Fred Bergsten referring to an economic relationship, began to gain wider currency among foreign policy experts as a way of recognizing the centrality of the U.S.-

China relationship toward the beginning of the Obama administration. To learn more about the term, see http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China_Business/KD22Cb01.html. [Editor's Note.]

² Blake Hounshell, "China Is Now Iran's Top Trading Partner," *Foreign Policy*, May 23, 2010.

³ "China Definitely Propping up Sudan Govt: BBC," ABC News, July 13, 2008, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/07/13/2302298.htm>, accessed July 21, 2009.

⁴ "UN: Create Darfur Recovery Fund for Sudanese Oil Revenues," UN (March 19, 2007), <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2007/03/19/un-create-darfur-recovery-fund-sudanese-oil-revenues>, accessed May 2010.

⁵ Gill Bates and Chin Hao Huang, "China's Expanding Role in Peacekeeping: Prospects and Policy Implications," SIPRI Policy Paper no. 25, November 2009, <http://books.sipri.org/files/PP/SIPRI25.pdf>.

⁶ On July 17, 1998, 160 countries decided in Rome to establish a permanent International Criminal Court to try individuals responsible for the most heinous crimes affecting the entire world like genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The Rome Statute was amended several times (1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2002) and finally came into effect July 1, 2002. See http://untreaty.un.org/English/millennium/law/penal_matters/xviii_10E.htm. [Editor's Note.]