

Will Darfur Steal the Olympic Spotlight?

Beginning in 2004, U.S.-based activists organized within the Save Darfur Coalition launched a formidable campaign against what they passionately assert is an unbroken genocide in Darfur instigated by the Sudanese government. In its initial period, the movement mushroomed in strength and concentrated mostly on influencing U.S. policy and approaches. Soon thereafter, it shifted to give priority to influencing China. Both of these efforts have had a constructive impact, but they have also been disturbingly hyperbolic, dismissive of facts, and counterproductive in some important respects.

In the case of the United States, the movement has successfully pressed for U.S. leadership on the African Union (AU)–UN peace operation, approved by the UN Security Council in July 2007, to deploy a 26,000-person force to provide stability and critical humanitarian protection in Darfur. At the same time, however, it has gravely limited the ability of U.S. leadership to seek new compromises on Darfur and made it very difficult for Washington to sustain a dialogue with Khartoum and southern Sudanese leaders to advance the January 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which ended 25 years of internal war between Sudan's North and South. These shortfalls stem from the movement's unwavering ideology that Sudan is home to incessant genocide and its determination to challenge Washington's diplomacy whenever it ventures into serious engagement with Khartoum.

In the case of China, the campaign has entered into an unprecedented dialogue with Beijing and contributed positively to changing Chinese policies and approaches, but it continues routinely to undervalue the significance of China's shifts. As of early March 2008, just prior to the Tibet uprisings and

J. Stephen Morrison is director of the CSIS Africa Program and the CSIS Task Force on HIV/AIDS. He may be reached at smorrison@csis.org.

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related clashes during the Olympic torch's travels in Europe and the United States, Beijing appeared to have concluded that it had done enough to satisfy itself on Darfur and had had enough of placating U.S. nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Confident that its approach to Darfur was defensible and that President George W. Bush and more than 100 other heads of state would attend the Olympic Games opening ceremonies in August, Chinese officials seemed, however nervously, to conclude that China could withstand some measure of inevitable NGO criticism and disruptions on Darfur before and during the Olympics.

Between the late spring of 2008 and the August Olympics, the struggle will continue between the Darfur campaigners and the government of China over who will own the Olympic "coming-out party"—whether Beijing will choose to bend any more to the demands of an aggressive NGO movement and whether the Darfur campaigners will be capable of disrupting the storyline of Beijing's bid for a new international standing. The wildcard, of course, will be Tibet, a far more strategic threat than Darfur to China's sovereignty and stability, and how the burgeoning international controversy surrounding Tibet and the Olympics plays to the advantage or disadvantage of Western Darfur campaigners.

An Exceptional Campaign for Darfur Is Born

The Darfur conflict was sparked in early 2003 when two armed rebel movements attacked and disabled almost three dozen Sudanese military and police garrisons. What followed throughout 2003–2004 was a period of high militia violence, backed by the Sudanese government and directed against civilians, which left an estimated 200,000 dead, displaced more than 2.5 million, and drove another 200,000 persons into neighboring Chad. Intense international media attention transmitted these brutal realities vividly. Against this backdrop, the Save Darfur Coalition's membership quickly grew to more than 180 groups and was strengthened in 2004 by the 10th anniversary of the Rwanda genocide, the active engagement of prominent celebrities such as George Clooney and Don Cheadle, close ties with key figures in Congress, and declarations in late 2004 by the U.S. Senate and House and the White House that what was unfolding in Darfur constituted genocide.

With a generous annual budget of \$15 million and aggressive Internet fundraising, the coalition was able to bring concerted pressure through media blitzes, divestment campaigns, saturation petition drives, electronic postcards, student chapters, high-profile "Global Days for Darfur," and expensive advertising. These actions steadily built strength in 2005–2006 and were targeted chiefly at Washington, but also at London and the United Nations, among

others. The object was to hammer home that genocide persists in Darfur and hence the urgent need persists to do more to pressure and punish Khartoum, protect the innocent, and promote a ceasefire, a negotiated settlement, and an introduction of a robust international peace operation.

The situation on the ground in Darfur shifted in 2006–2007. Violence levels fell to pre-2003 levels, while humanitarian operations stabilized, sustaining the lives of more than 2.5 million civilians in displaced camps. Armed clashes continued between rebels and government-backed militias in a context that also featured a chaotic mix of ever-changing factional infighting among rebel groups, opportunistic banditry, and cross-border violence by proxy groups moving in and out of the Central African Republic and Chad.

Yet, the coalition's rhetoric never reflected these new realities. The movement's narrative held to what had worked well up to that point: a tale of unbroken genocide against innocent civilians at the hands of government-backed militias. In line with this mythology, the coalition repeatedly called for a no-fly zone over Darfur to be enforced by NATO. Many international relief NGOs with on-the-ground operational responsibilities, civilian clients to serve, and staff to protect questioned the coalition's characterization of the situation on the ground. They argued that the situation did not easily translate into heroes versus villains and that the threat of a no-fly zone was empty and rhetorical and risked provoking retaliation by Khartoum against relief operations that sustained the lives of more than 2.5 million displaced persons inside Darfur.

Under intensified criticism in the face of this controversy, the coalition overhauled its leadership and scaled back the vitriol of its advertising campaigns in 2007. Although the leadership changed, the basic way that the coalition framed Darfur did not, and the coalition's larger sway over U.S. opinion held. The coalition suffused the Internet, media, and other outlets with relentless claims that genocide in Darfur continued apace. It sustained its strong ties in Congress and internal links up to senior levels within the Bush administration. Its views were echoed often in the editorial pages of major U.S. newspapers. Although seldom backed by data detailing levels and patterns of violence in Darfur, the coalition's perspective continued to have an outsized influence over U.S. opinion. It made some inroads in shaping opinion in Europe, but with nowhere near the success achieved in the United States. Close observers and policymakers in the United States and Europe often regarded its views as ill informed and counterproductive.

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By locking Sudan into the genocide box, the movement steadily reduced Washington's latitude and motivation to engage Khartoum in any serious negotiation to resolve the situation in Darfur and to consolidate the peace concluded in 2005 between the North and South through the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Then–Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick played a lead role in the spring 2006 negotiations held in Abuja, Nigeria, on a Darfur peace settlement. When that accord was sealed in June and soon thereafter foundered, campaigners were quick to condemn Washington. U.S. diplomacy steadily withered further. When then–U.S. special envoy Andrew Natsios attempted to mediate in late 2007 between Khartoum and the Government of Southern Sudan regarding a flashpoint dispute over the Abyei special territory, he was vilified, blocked from negotiating with any confidence or mandate, and driven to resign in December 2007.

Act II: China

As early as 2006, activists turned their sights on China, creating the specter of a “Genocide Olympics” marred by protests and disruptions. The focus on China was not entirely new; China had been regularly singled out for special criticism from the beginning of the coalition's work. It did signal, however, that China had graduated to a new priority level. In certain respects, this choice was predictable given the alluring approach of the Beijing Olympics in August 2008 and China's enduring and conspicuous alliance with Sudan; predominant 40 percent share in the oil sector; role as a principal arms supplier, along with Russia and Belarus; and record of blocking any serious UN Security Council punitive action against Sudan during 2003–2004, when mass killings and displacement of civilians at the hands of the government-backed *janjaweed* militia were at their peak.

In other respects, however, the choice to make China a priority was hardly inevitable. The decision followed an internal coalition debate about the advisability of making China, as an external party to the Sudan drama, the center of attention and whether that would be effective or potentially divert direct pressures away from Khartoum. An associated risk was that, in the context of the Olympics, Darfur would compete for attention with several other, more long-standing issues of direct internal import within China, most notably Tibet, Taiwan, the rights of the Muslim population in Xinjiang in western China, media freedom, civil liberties, and environmental degradation.

These doubts ultimately did not win the argument, and the campaigners' focus on China intensified, spurred in particular by the activism of Mia Farrow and her “Dream for Darfur” initiative. In this endeavor, the coalition also actively partnered with several other affiliates: STAND: A Student

Anti-Genocide Coalition; the Genocide Intervention Network; and the ENOUGH project. In 2007 they began a torch relay with planned visits to Bosnia, Chad, Germany, and Rwanda. Divestment efforts focused on Fidelity Investments for its shareholdings in Petro China, owner of the Chinese oil firm China National Petroleum Corporation, which was active in Sudan. Most recently, in early 2008, they issued demands that the Chinese government deliver one-half of the transport helicopters required for the hybrid AU-UN mission in Darfur (UNAMID); support UN Security Council sanctions targeting Khartoum officials and militia and rebel leaders who delayed the deployment of UNAMID; suspend all military cooperation, including arms sales; and form a diplomatic quartet with France, the United Kingdom, and the United States to support the AU and the UN in the deployment of UNAMID.

Moreover, throughout 2006 and 2007, Khartoum's behavior did little to help change the tenor of discussions. Even while yielding to mounting international pressure and acceding to UN Security Council Resolution 1769 in July 2007 authorizing the AU-UN force of 26,000 police and military, President Omar Bashir of Sudan remained defiant of external critics and in open denial of the horrible realities within his borders. His government continued to engage in delaying tactics that seriously slowed the arrival of the AU-UN troops and did little to rein in the janjaweed. In the first few months of 2008, Khartoum launched bloody offensives in Darfur, in anticipation of the expansion of the AU-UN force, leaving thousands dead, injured, and displaced.

The lead-up to the August 2008 Olympics simply presented too sweet an opportunity for U.S. NGO activists to forgo. China's desire to ensure the success of its coming-out party as an ethical, rising global superpower would be at its highest. In the minds of campaigners, a focused campaign has promise of leveraging real change in China's behavior toward Sudan if China faces the credible threat that activists might spoil the U.S. opinion climate of China and the Olympics, actively disrupt the Olympics themselves, and persuade celebrities, prominent political figures, and corporate sponsors to stay away. Hence, Mia Farrow has planned for a broadcast from Darfur two days before the opening ceremonies, has called on corporate sponsors to pull back from hosting the Olympics, hopes to rally a few hundred Olympic athletes to engage in public protest, and suggests that they may take other disruptive actions.

The campaign seems to have affected China's policies in a meaningful and enduring way.

By this logic, the campaigners might force Beijing to walk back from its hard interests—oil, security, and political allegiances—and engage in greater efforts to press Khartoum harder and more vocally than has been the case thus far to end its abuses in Darfur and to expedite the full deployment of the AU-UN force. At this moment, still a few months shy of the Olympics opening ceremonies, has the campaign's hypothesis been verified? Has it actually affected China's policies and behavior in a meaningful and enduring way? The short answer is a provisional and highly ambiguous yes. Obviously, the Olympics have not yet happened, and much time remains between then and now. Tibet has surged for the fore and now dominates international debate over the Olympics. Moreover, much secrecy and uncertainty surround Chinese calculations, and that is not likely to change. Yet, there have been changes in Chinese policies toward Darfur.

A Small Measure of Progress

NGO campaigners have decidedly split interests: seeking concrete incremental changes in China's behavior in Sudan and elevating their own profile into the global media through sweeping hyperbolic claims that China bears overriding responsibility for genocide in Darfur and has the power to change the situation rapidly if only it had sufficient political will. Those two interests are hardly compatible and in this case have clashed. Self-interest and media hunger are difficult to stave off when choosing between admitting success in engineering better Chinese behavior and sounding the alarm that villainy is still in our midst.

The pattern repeated itself over the course of 2007. Pragmatic, focused indoor discussions took place between campaigners and Chinese officials over feasible steps that China could take to move matters forward in Darfur. The campaigners followed these talks with loud public denunciations of China. Beginning in late 2006 and accelerating in 2007, several changes in China's approach to Sudan unfolded for which the campaigners could claim some measure of credit. Yet, for each of these changes, it can also be argued that a convergence of other factors came into play, most notably internal Chinese critics of Beijing's policies, Western powers, vocal African states, and UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon.

As the debate over an AU-UN peace operation accelerated in the second half of 2006, senior Chinese officials intervened at key moments in the UN Security Council, the AU summits, and Khartoum directly to press Khartoum first to accept the Annan plan devised in 2006 and subsequently for Resolution 1769, authorizing the UNAMID deployment. In May 2007, Ambassador Liu Guijin was appointed as the Chinese special envoy for Africa, expressly

charged with handling Darfur. In that post, he and others such as Assistant Minister Zhai Jin and the Chinese ambassadors to the UN and Washington became highly active, consulting widely with Western powers, other African officials, and the AU and UN. Liu and others traveled throughout Darfur and showed an unprecedented receptivity to extensive engagement with activist critics.

Late in 2007 and into the first part of 2008, Beijing pressed Khartoum to resolve delays over visas and customs clearances and to conclude a status of forces agreement between Khartoum and the UN. Senior Chinese officials delivered sharp public criticism of Khartoum at several points that stepped well outside China's traditional policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of partner governments. When Khartoum appeared to be egregiously slowing the UNAMID deployment plans at the end of 2007, Beijing hinted loudly it might acquiesce to UN Security Council action on targeted sanctions against senior Sudanese officials.

Beijing has become more innovative and experimental in its diplomacy.

These achievements notwithstanding, there have been clear limits to how far the Chinese have been prepared to bend. They have taken no steps to restrict investment in Sudan's oil sector or any other sector or to limit arms sales. Public Chinese criticism of Khartoum remained very limited. As 2008 unfolded, Beijing's interest slackened in pressing Khartoum to hasten the deployment of non-African battalions from Thailand and Bangladesh and, later, Pakistan and Jordan. Following his visit to Khartoum and Ndjamen in late February and early March, Liu appeared to shift course abruptly from conciliation and outreach to tough confrontation with the campaigners.

Chinese patience seemed to have run out, spurred in part by frustration at the NGOs' reluctance to acknowledge changes in China's position as well as embarrassment and anger over Steven Spielberg's decision to step down in February 2008 as an adviser on the Olympics opening ceremonies. (Spielberg had come under direct personal attack from Mia Farrow, as part of her Dream Darfur efforts, as "the next Leni Riefenstahl," the German filmmaker notoriously close to the Hitler government.) In private and in public, the Chinese had increasingly begun to describe the campaigners as self-interested zealots committed solely to vilifying China and scoring points in the media regardless of steps China took to act constructively in Darfur. This was a marked change in tone from the Chinese openness to inviting NGO critics into the embassy in Washington just a few months earlier. In its place was a new defense of sovereign dignity and national interests.

China's New Realities

China's recent experience with Sudan, U.S. policymakers, and NGO campaigners has stirred four key awakenings. First, this has been a period of sober realism for Beijing. As China seeks acceptance as an ethical, rising global power, Sudan has forced it to acknowledge that existing or ongoing intimate linkages with pariah states based on oil, security, and political alliances can invite sustained attack from U.S. campaigners and carry a heavy price to China's

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global image as well as in the diplomatic investment required to remediate harm. More strategic thought and political oversight is essential to protect Chinese interests. Allowing Chinese interests to be defined overwhelmingly by oil and security carries unacceptably high risks.

Second, recent events have forced China to become far more conscious of the limits of its knowledge and sway on complex conflicts such as those in Sudan. China does not set the pace of UN peacekeeping deployment, although it

commits an engineering unit; it cannot influence Darfur's multiple, fragmented armed rebel movements to come to the bargaining table; it lacks knowledge and influence to shape implementation of the unsteady Comprehensive Peace Agreement between Sudan's North and South. Bashir may listen to China's entreaties, but he has other bases of external support and is far from an abject dependent. Chinese overtures to the Government of Southern Sudan remain at an early point and have yet to translate into meaningful relations and influence. Similarly, the Chinese are newly returned to Chad, largely still unfamiliar with the terrain, and vulnerable to the type of dangerous surprises that its diplomats and oil workers experienced during the rebel siege of Ndjamen in February. China faced the embarrassment that Sudan-backed rebels besieging the Deby regime in Chad carried Chinese weapons. Moreover, in fleeing the violence in Ndjamen, many Chinese depended on Western energy companies for evacuation.

Third, Beijing has become more innovative and experimental in its diplomacy in response to external pressure. It has made ample use of its special envoy; expanded its diplomacy to encompass a larger range of African, EU, NGO, and UN contacts; pushed its diplomats into direct field experiences in Darfur; and begun to practice a more proactive form of public outreach, laying out and defending its observations and approaches. These experiences will likely have an enduring influence on Chinese diplomacy and be carried over into other difficult situations.

Finally, China is much more aware of the NGO campaigners' power, speed, agility, and ability to shape popular perceptions and diplomatic demands. Beijing now understands the degree to which the NGOs have their own self-interest in perpetuating their influence, even in the face of the very changes they seek in the behavior of major powers because it might actually diminish the value of the NGO services and presence. In the specific instance of Sudan, Chinese engagement with the NGO sector has translated into a complex and at times exasperating negotiation over the standards by which to judge China's behavior. This experience has generated respect, fear, disdain, and suspicion of the U.S. NGO community among Chinese officials. NGO overreach intermixed with Chinese obstinacy and pride can result in a vituperative backlash, allegations of Western hypocrisy and double standards, and a hardening of China's position. What that likely means for the future is that China will pursue a mixed strategy: engagement, infiltration, co-option, and intimidation. Trust and open dialogue with the NGOs will be in short supply.

A Preview of What's Next?

The recent upheaval surrounding Tibet has created a new internal threat for China, one far graver than anything Darfur poses. It directly touches sovereign interests and national stability. In the Dalai Lama, the "Free Tibet" movement has an established, revered leader and statesman with ready access to Western leaders and backing by an international consensus that a dialogue between him and Beijing is a sensible, urgent objective. The movement also has an established global infrastructure with far greater reach and experience than the Darfur campaign.

How events play out in Tibet will dominate Olympic discussions and the decisionmaking of major Western powers, corporate sponsors, the media, and others. Beijing might conceivably choose to make additional compromises on Darfur to relieve international pressures largely fueled by Tibet, but for now that is mere speculation. Ultimately, the wildcard will likely not be events in Darfur itself. Rather, it will be how the violent upheaval in Tibet plays out in the coming period within Tibet and China at large.

There are also revelations for American campaigners born of these recent experiences. The Darfur movement has achieved much in its short span, reaching far corners of American society and significantly shaping U.S. opinion. Increasingly in the lead-up to the Olympics, the movement's power, leverage, media access, and fundraising have relied on a hyperbolic approach that incessantly paints China as the lead architect of genocide in Darfur and exaggerates China's power and the speed with which it can effect change. At this loud pitch, it has obscured understanding of its own achievements in bringing

about important incremental changes in China's behavior and risked—and actively helped provoke—backlash from the Chinese side. Over the long term, well past the end of the Olympics, the movement's legitimacy and effectiveness will rest on its ability to shift to a more nuanced and grounded appreciation of realities in Darfur, on a greater ability to capitalize on changes in China's approach, and on more realistic and informed demands on China's engagement in Africa.