China's Unsavory Friends

By Gary J. Bao

In years past, the Chinese government's poor human rights record was only a problem for you if you happened to be Chinese. As China's power grows, its hostility toward human rights is becoming a problem for non-Chinese, too. Propelled mostly by economic opportunity, China is fast becoming the friend of last resort for some of the world's most isolated dictators and bad guys — in Asia and beyond.

The examples are mounting. On May 13, 2005, thousands of Uzbekis rallied in the city of Andijan, including some armed people who had led a jailbreak as well as unarmed people protesting the repressive government of President Islam Karimov. In response, Karimov's security forces fired indiscriminately into the crowds, in what Human Rights Watch has called a massacre of hundreds of people. But China seems untroubled. "We consistently staunch support the Uzbekistan government's striking at the three forces, which are terrorism, splinterism and extremism," declared the Chinese foreign ministry.

On May 25, Chinese President Hu Jintao welcomed Karimov on a state visit to Beijing, complete with a 21-gun salute. While in China, Karimov signed a $3 billion deal for a joint Chinese-Uzbek venture to develop Uzbekistan's oil fields. Then, in July, China joined Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in setting up a timetable for U.S. military withdrawal from Central Asia. After America criticized the bloodshed and the U.S. alliance with Uzbekistan's government from the Andijan crackdown, Karimov kicked American troops out of the strategic Karshi-Khambab base.

In Sudan, the government continues to sponsor the slaughter and displacement of tribes in the western region of Darfur. But Sudan's oil supplies are irresistible to China, the world's fastest-growing oil consumer. The China National Petroleum Co. is a big investor in Sudan's oil fields and owns most of an oil field in southern Darfur. CNPC and the South Sudan Corp., another Chinese state-owned firm, helped build a new pipeline from the south, where much of Sudan's oil is located — to Port Sudan. China also is a major arms supplier to Sudan and has used its U.N. Security Council veto to block sanctions on Sudan in response to human rights abuses.

As Robert Mugabe continues to stain Zimbabwe, he relies on China to break his international isolation, in what he calls his "Look East" policy. Last July, Mugabe arrived in Beijing for six days of talks, including a meeting with Hu, who referred to him as "an old friend." At the same time, the United Nations was blasting Mugabe for a campaign of demolishing homes in the urban poor, leaving some 700,000 people homeless — a policy to support of Mugabe's opponents in elections in March 2005.

In July, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) pushed Burma's isolated ruling junta into giving up its turn at chairing the organization in the coming year — a slap from the usually meek and inelastic body. But Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing cushioned the blow by pulling out of the ASEAN summit in Laos and flying to Burma to meet with the military rulers of what he called "the friendliest country." In February, Ge, Soe Win, the Burmese prime minister, met with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. According to China's official Xinhua news service, Soe Win hailed China's "resolute support and sensible assistance." After meetings with Hu and Li, Soe Win later claimed that China — the junta's most loyal ally — would block attempts to put Burma on the U.N. Security Council's agenda.

Much of the Chinese government's support for bad guys is driven by its need for energy. This condition is hardly unique to China — look at the U.S. relationship with the Saudi monarchy. Its search for oil is more about the strategic needs of its red-hot economy than about international primacy. In addition to Sudan and Uzbekistan, China is leasing for energy resources from such wary countries such as Iran, Angola and Cabo. Hugo Chavez, the leftist president of oil-rich Venezuela, has also reached out to China. Without mentioning oil, I once asked an informal retired Chinese general about China's relationships with so many dictatorships. He replied that China's alliances were not met by lies or dissimulation but by practical necessity, and that China was a developing country seeking energy independence. But oil is not the only factor. Chinese leaders worry about U.S. hegemony, particularly when it's coupled with rhetoric about human rights and democratization. As a matter of principle, the Chinese government is deeply skeptical of military interventions to protect human rights — doubly so since NATO bombed China's embassy in Belgrade in May 1999.

When a U.N. summit in September approved the idea of an international "responsibility to protect" civilians when their own governments do not, Li, the Chinese foreign minister, warned that the U.N. Security Council had to approve such steps. "We are against any unilateral intervention on the ground of rash conclusion that a nation is unable or unwilling to protect its own citizens," Li said. In his recent Beijing meeting with Soe Win, the Chinese premier Wen suggested that China would welcome more "domestic reconciliation" in Burma, but, according to Xinhua, he "stressed that Myanmar's internal affairs should be resolved through consultation by the government and people of Myanmar on their own."

Joshua Cooper Ramo, a former Time journalist who teaches at Tsinghua University in Beijing, has suggested that China is offering the world an alternative to the "Washington consensus" model of development. The Beijing Consensus, he writes, includes technological innovation, economic development based on equality and sustainability, and, most important for the bad guys, national sovereignty — championing non-interference and opposing foreign meddling. In September, then Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan called NATO's airstrikes to protect the Kosovo "an illusionary president" and warned of the "rampage of hegemonism." Tang added: "When the sovereignty of a country is put in jeopardy, its human rights can hardly be protected effectively."

Of course, an emerging China is hardly a new Soviet Union. China wants to participate in the world order, not override it. But it does not encourage democracy, but only to destroy it, either. China participates in many international institutions, even sending judges to the U.N. war crimes tribunal in The Hague. Many Chinese officials fear their recent choice of friends is shortsighted. This ragtag gallery of unstable allies hardly matches China's own image of itself as a confident rising great power.

In September that received lots of attention is Beijing, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Robert B. Zoellick encouraged China to become a "responsible stakeholder" in the international system, gaining respect and stature as well as more power. Backing pariah regimes hardly qualifies — not least because Zoellick has been the point man on U.S. efforts to help Darfur. He noted during his morning jogs in Khartoum, he saw Chinese doing tai chi, and said: "China should take more oil from Sudan — it should take some responsibility for resolving Sudan's human crisis."

In the longer run, the strategy of cozying up to dictators at the expense of their peoples is self-defeating. America has learned this lesson the hard way in places as Pakistan and Egypt, where the price of friendship with the regime has been a deep and popular anti-Americanism.

Convenient as the bad guys may seem right now, China would be wise to avoid the same mistake.