

China's Unsavory Friends

By GARY J. BASS

In years past, the Chinese government's poor human rights record was only a problem for you if you happened to be Chinese. But as China's power and influence in Asia grow, its hostility toward human rights is becoming a problem for non-Chinese, too. Prompted mostly by economic opportunism, 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 Uzbeks 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 seemed untroubled. "We consistently staunchly support the Uzbekistan government's striking at the three forces, which are terrorism, splittism and extremism," declared the Chinese foreign ministry.

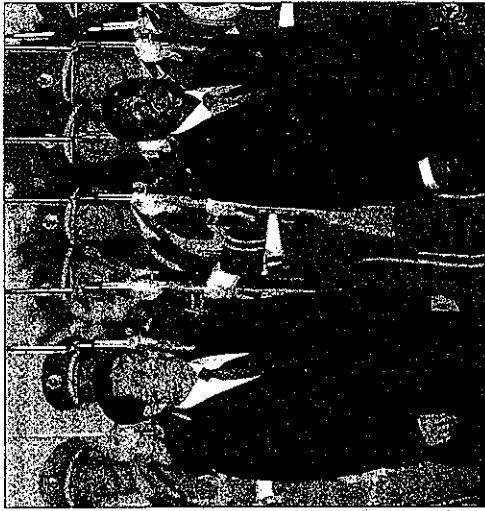
On May 25, Chinese President Hu Jintao welcomed Karimov on a state visit to Beijing, complete with a 21-gun salute. While in China, Karimov inked a \$600 million deal for a joint Chinese-Uzbek venture to develop Uzbekistan's oil fields. Then, in July, China joined Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in requesting a timetable for U.S. military withdrawal from Central Asia. After America criticized the bloodshed and the United Nations airlifted to safety Uzbek refugees from the Andijan crackdown, Karimov kicked American troops out of the strategic Karski-Khanabad base.

In Sudan, the government continues to sponsor the slaughter and dispossession 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 Sinopec Corp., another Chinese state-owned firm, helped build a newly opened 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 clout to protect Sudan from global pressure and weaken threats of oil sanctions.

As Robert Mugabe continues to strangle 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 cozy 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 the homes of the urban poor, leaving some 700,000 people homeless — payback for urban support of Mugabe's opponents in elections in March 2005.

In July, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

Gary J. Bass, an associate professor at the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University, is writing a book on humanitarian intervention.



AP/WIDEWORLD
Hu's your daddy: Chinese President Hu Jintao welcomed Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe to Beijing in 2005, calling him "an old friend."

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 ideal 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 willful 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 gingerly 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 inequality and sustainability, and, most important for the bad guys, national sovereignty — championing non-interference and opposing foreign meddling. In September 1999, then-Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan called NATO's airstrikes to protect the Kosovars an "ominous precedent" 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 overturn it. It does not encourage democracy but is not out 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 rogues' gallery of unstable allies hardly matches China's own image of itself as a confident rising great power.

In a speech in September that received lots of attention in 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 raw power. Backing pariah regimes hardly qualifies — not least because Zoellick has been the point man on U.S. efforts to help Darfur. He noted that during his morning jogs in Khartoum, he saw Chinese doing tai chi, and said: "China should take more than 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 such 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.

gbass@princeton.edu