

CHINA'S EMERGENCE AS A PEACEBUILDING ACTOR

POLICY BRIEF 4/2018

by Pascal Abb

Ever since its announcement in 2013, the Chinese 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) has attracted significant attention from international observers, speculating about its impact on fields ranging from economic integration to geopolitics. However, the peace and security implications of the BRI have seen comparatively little interest, as has China's overall engagement with conflict and post-conflict societies – many of which, like Pakistan, South Sudan and Sri Lanka, are key members of the BRI.¹ Due to the enormous volume of Chinese investments now being poured into these countries, China seems poised to gain a significant stake in ongoing peace processes and other settlement efforts. This will crucially affect their post-conflict reconstruction and economic development. While the existence of economic interests is not the sole explanation for deeper political and military engagement in peace processes, it also provides a powerful incentive for China to step these efforts up further.

If this engagement does indeed happen, the sum total of Chinese activities may ultimately amount to a style of peacebuilding distinct from the efforts advanced by Western countries. This briefing presents a brief summary of these activities, how they are being understood and conceptualised by Chinese experts, and in which countries their confluence is having the largest current impact. Chinese voices are also advancing a particular narrative regarding the relation between peace and development that substantially differs from what is discussed as the 'peace-development-nexus' by OECD donors. Finally, the question is raised to what degree Chinese efforts in

peacekeeping, conflict mediation and infrastructure investment in conflict zones are coordinated and thus part of a genuinely alternative model of peacebuilding. While the currently available evidence is far from sufficient to answer this question, it is worth posing if only to inform future efforts.

Expanding activities in conflict settings

Owing to a lack of conceptual clarity as well as the large number of involved agencies, many Chinese 'peacebuilding' activities are not labelled as such or indeed primarily directed towards this aim. Three main strands are important here: peacekeeping, conflict mediation, and economic investments, especially in infrastructure. The latter also capture profit-oriented investments rather than pure aid projects, which may seem at odds with a traditional peacebuilding portfolio. However, I argue that they should be included here due to Chinese beliefs in the fundamental importance of such projects to peace processes and their frequent placement in high-risk environments.

China's emergence as a major contributor to PKOs has already been extensively covered,² and relatively little has changed in the patterns and tasks of Chinese deployments: geographically, they remain focused on Africa (with major ongoing missions in South Sudan, Darfur, Mali, Congo and Liberia); and operationally, on the provision of social services and (re)construction rather than combat roles. Given this focus and the previous strong performance of Chinese peacekeepers, these deployments are the most likely to form the nucleus of more comprehensive Chinese peacebuilding projects.

¹ The ASPR and Saferworld convened a workshop on this topic in Vienna on September 27, 2018, whose [proceedings](#) have been summarised and published.

² See Miwa Hirono and Marc Lanteigne, 'Introduction: China and UN Peacekeeping', *International Peacekeeping* 18:3, 243-256, as well as the other articles in the same issue.



Chinese Peacekeepers in South Sudan. Source: UNMISS/Eric Kanalstein

By comparison, conflict mediation is a relatively new field for Chinese diplomats. As mentioned above, such missions tend to focus heavily on countries that have seen major BRI investments,³ although they have most recently also covered political hotspots in the Middle East, where China does not yet have major economic interests.⁴ This is probably the area where China is facing the steepest learning curve, and an additional handicap in its focus on bilateral state-to-state relations that make it difficult to engage subnational actors and prevent the participation of Chinese civil society groups.

Finally, many eye-catching Chinese investments of the last years have gone to conflict and post-conflict societies like Pakistan, South Sudan or Sri Lanka, committing the Chinese government to their stability and making them crucial test cases for whether peace and reconciliation can really spring from new economic opportunities. However, this will require great sensitivity towards local conflict structures, as an unequal distribution of the benefits and (mainly environmental) costs of such projects could easily stoke tensions instead. It is also important not to

confuse such investments with the far more limited volume of Chinese aid. However, the crucial point here is that state-backed guarantees and political exhortations are driving enormous amounts of Chinese capital to high-risk environments where other international actors fear to tread, making them a major factor in post-conflict reconstruction.

A few countries can be identified where these activities are already overlapping, where an almost-accidental Chinese peacebuilding model may be evolving, and where greater future coordination is the most likely to result in a genuinely new approach. The most obvious case in this regard is South Sudan,⁵ but a similar confluence of all three efforts can be found in the DRC and Sudan. Chinese political and economic influence on Myanmar's peace process has been profound though not always positive,⁶ while its rapidly expanding footprint in Afghanistan has led to expectations that it will become a crucial actor in local conflict management.⁷

³ Helena Legarda and Marie Hoffmann, '[China as a conflict mediator](#)', *MERICS China Mapping*, August 22, 2018.

⁴ Mordechai Chaziza, '[China's approach to conflict mediation in the Middle East](#)', *Middle East Institute*, May 8, 2018.

⁵ Wu Wenbin and Guo Rusheng, '[wo zhu nansudan weihe budui yong zhencheng jianshe heping](#) (our peacekeepers in South Sudan are building genuine peace)', *People's Daily*, October 16, 2013.

⁶ Lina Alexandra and Marc Lanteigne, 'New actors and innovative approaches to peacebuilding: the case of Myanmar', in: Cedric de Coning (ed.), *Rising Powers and Peacebuilding: Breaking the Mold?*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017.

⁷ Shubhangi Pandey, '[China's surreptitious advance in Afghanistan](#)', *The Diplomat*, September 22, 2018.

From "peaceful development" to "developmental peace"

Perhaps surprisingly, despite the expansion of related Chinese activities, the concept of 'peacebuilding' (*jianshe heping* 建设和平) still occupies relatively little space in Chinese academic debates or official documents. More traditional concepts like peacekeeping still dominate; however, this also makes it easy to identify new impulses to domestic debates - one of which stands out in particular, since it links the pursuit of peace to the issue of 'development', a term whose centrality to virtually any policy debate in China can hardly be overstated. Starting with the reform era, economic development has replaced earlier, ideologically derived terms at the core of Chinese Communist Party (CPC) ideology, become its main source of legitimacy, and seeped into fields ranging from social to foreign policy. Its most notable previous linkage with 'peace' came in the form of official attempts to provide an overarching, positive narrative for China's rise on the world stage that would counter perceptions of a 'China threat', which eventually resulted in the parole of 'peaceful development'.⁸

Given the success of China's own economic reform policy, speculation about if and how it would seek to actively export its model to other countries has run rampant, especially in the wake of major initiatives like the BRI. What we might be increasingly seeing in conflict regions that attract Chinese investments, however, is not so much a wholesale adoption of this model, but rather a much more basic doctrine that stresses the importance of development to provide better economic opportunities for all concerned parties and thus relieve tensions between them. This point has been explicitly raised by Chinese academics who, over the past few years, have proposed a new concept called the 'developmental peace' (*fazhan heping* 发展和平).⁹

According to these voices, the notion of a 'liberal peace' championed by Western and UN actors is overly focused on political and institutional reconstruction in post-conflict societies, to the detriment of providing a solid economic basis for peace processes. This, they argue, is rooted in a specific Western political experience that prioritizes personal freedom and self-expression, considers a lack of these factors to be the root cause of conflict and hence treats their (re-)establishment

as the key to lasting peace. By contrast, China's own experience of moving past a century of turmoil towards economic growth, relative internal stability and steadily rising national strength is portrayed as proving the fundamental link between peace and development. Hence, there is a significant gap for China to enter, posing not just as the provider of technical blueprints for post-conflict reconstruction, but as a genuine norm entrepreneur, stressing the principles of sovereignty, political stability and ownership by local governments over the more intrusive Western-led programme of liberal peacebuilding.

So far, this concept has not been adopted as official government policy, and it has also not been proposed as a fundamental challenge to existing practices (indeed, the abovementioned academics stress its complementarity with liberal approaches). However, the underlying thoughts and values are a staple of Chinese statements in organs like the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) and already inform Chinese activities in multiple fields relevant to post-conflict reconstruction. Accordingly, this conceptual framework is probably best seen as a way of integrating existing practices towards a much more ambitious overall goal, as well as finding an overarching theme that can be used to promote them.

It is important to acknowledge that China's key selling points – political non-interference and its own rapid development – are fundamentally attractive to many post-conflict societies, although they are often undermined by, respectively, concerns about Chinese sincerity and long-term economic dependency. A more coherent conceptual approach could go a long way towards bringing Chinese thought and action into line and thus improve its credibility. International actors should take these ambitions seriously and anticipate how an emerging China-sponsored alternative model for peace will impact their own activities.

Outlook

With its constantly expanding activities, increasingly sophisticated theoretical underpinnings, and tolerance for stability risks, China seems poised to emerge as a crucial actor in global peacebuilding. This process will likely not be without its setbacks - for one, the theory of the 'developmental peace' is a

⁸ The initially proposed slogan was 'peaceful rise'; however, this was subsequently changed to 'peaceful development', since the former term was still considered to be potentially worrying to others, see Bonnie Glaser and Evan Medeiros, 'The changing ecology of foreign policy-making in China: the ascension and demise of the theory of 'peaceful rise'', *The China Quarterly* 190, 291-310.

⁹ See He Yin, 'fazhan heping: lianheguo weihe jianhe zhong de zhongguo fang'an (developmental peace: China's vision in UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding)', *guoji zhengzhi yanjiu* 4/2017, 10-32; Wang Xuejun: 'Developmental peace: understanding China's Africa policy in peace and security', in: Alden, Chris et al. (eds.), *China and Africa*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018.

relatively untested concept, and conflict sensitivity is also a new paradigm for Chinese investments especially in Africa. But given the enormous economic and political capital that Beijing is now investing in conflict-prone environments, it is likely in for the long haul. Learning from these experiences will steadily allow it to refine its approach and perhaps consolidate it into a genuine model. Established peacebuilding actors should take these initiatives seriously and closely track how China's efforts are shaping post-conflict societies, if only to gauge the consequences for their own roles.

Finally, paying attention to Chinese debates on the conceptual and normative underpinnings of these activities is not just of academic interest. Proponents of the 'developmental peace' have explicitly stressed its value for Chinese norm entrepreneurship and global leadership. If this concept gains wider traction, it would be an early sign that peacebuilding is poised to emerge as another field in which Beijing has shifted from a defensive attitude against liberal norms to an active, global assertion of its own values and methods.

Pascal Abb is a senior researcher at the Austrian Study Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution (ASPR). He is a member of the Regional Powers Network that studies the effects of ongoing power shifts in different world regions. His research focuses on the international relations of East Asia, Chinese foreign policy and the role of experts in policymaking.

The ASPR cooperates with national and international partners:

Conflict Peace Democracy Cluster (CPDC)
Political Settlements Research Programme (PSRP) University of
Edinburgh, School of Law
Herbert C. Kelman Institute for Interactive Conflict
Transformation (HKI)
Sigmund Freud University (SFU)
Austrian Federal Ministry for Defence (BMLV)

Find our publications here:

www.aspr.ac.at/briefings
www.aspr.ac.at/reports