

How is China Supporting Peace and Development?

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Changing Landscape of Assistance to Conflict-Affected States: Emerging and Traditional Donors and Opportunities for Collaboration Policy Brief #2

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Introduction

The ascension of China in a globalized world presents a number of challenges and opportunities in the sphere of conflict prevention, post-conflict reconstruction, and peacebuilding. While focusing on this particular field of inquiry, we are also proposing potential ways in which the international community could approach the rise of China. We do so primarily by analyzing a number of common assumptions about China's involvement in conflict prevention, post-conflict reconstruction, and peacebuilding, and through the identification of the most recent dynamics. It has commonly been argued that the demand for natural resources in growing economies such as China's fuels conflict in war-torn nations through neocolonialist practices. While such arguments should not be disregarded, we assert that the emergence of China in the new politics of reconstruction does not represent as grave a threat as has been portrayed by some.

The expansion of the Chinese military and the recent South China Sea dispute have been regarded as uniquely accurate indicators of an aggressive China's outward political posture. We argue instead that China's increasing efforts to contribute to international peace and security should be seen as an opportunity rather than a threat. Recently China has been pursuing its "desire to be seen as a responsible power" by upholding the principle of noninterference, committing extensively to U.N. Peacekeeping and supporting the African Union. In the changing geopolitical security environment, established and emerging powers alike ought to develop frameworks for cooperation that can mitigate the tensions associated with new power dynamics. By doing so, the international community can foster the successful integration of emerging powers in the management of post-conflict and transitional settings and the prevention of future violence.

China's Global Ambitions

China's growing engagement with international peace and security stems from its simultaneous ambition to expand both its economy and its influence. Among Chinese policymakers and academics, there has been a shift in the conceptualization of the relationship between security, development, and economic cooperation. The increasing awareness that economic growth and international political stability are intrinsically linked has caused the Chinese foreign policy establishment to pursue a strategy of "pacifying its extended geographic periphery."²

Since the early 2000s, China's foreign policy has centered on peaceful development. In the economic realm, this has resulted in extensive Chinese governmental support for outward foreign direct investment, particularly in Africa and Latin America. Chinese private and state-owned enterprises have been able to gain a foothold in the natural-resource industries of African and Latin American countries by offering subsidies. Affordable Chinese development loans, labor, technology, and infrastructure projects have proven to be highly attractive exchange goods, not least to regimes with disputed reputations regarding their upholding of human rights and democratic freedoms.³ Nowadays, large-scale Chinese infrastructure projects are being implemented all over the developing world. Previously, these were unimaginable under the auspices of Western donors. For China, these economic initiatives rapidly pay off as countries in Africa and Latin America intensify trade relations. In addition, the upsurge of the renminbi's value vis-à-vis other global currencies and its recent validation by the International Monetary Fund as an international reserve asset further strengthen Chinese financial influence.⁴

Paramount to these Chinese forms of economic cooperation is the principle of noninterference in domestic affairs of other countries. By combining noninterference with extensive multilateral collaborative efforts China, according to some scholars, is opting for a policy of "selective multilateralism." As Wu points out, "selective multilateralism means that there are areas in which China does not want to be bound by multilateral diplomacy, and where it likes to continue to employ a bilateralist and even a unilateralist approach."⁵ Instruments of foreign policy, including finance and economic cooperation regimes, are increasingly being leveraged by China to transform economies across the globe and solidify its position as a global economic power.

In the Asia-Pacific region in particular, China has recently forged a more robust economic posture to provide counterbalance to – among others – the American-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

Most notably, the country's relationship with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has intensified over the years, and numerous additional (economic) cooperation regimes, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) Initiative have been set up.

Selective multilateralism is also reflected in the Chinese reaction to the recent ruling by the Arbitration Court of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in favor of the Philippines in the South China Sea disputes. While rejecting the ruling, China is proposing other avenues to settle the conflict. The South China Sea is posing a particular challenge in the balancing of China's interest in growing economic ties with East and Southeast Asia and in fostering stability while protecting its territorial integrity in the region.

The Organization of China's Overseas Assistance

Within the framework of Chinese global ambitions, the country's overseas assistance is organized in a variety of ways. In essence, four government units are in charge of overseeing China's overseas assistance efforts: the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, select line ministries, and the International Liaison Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee. While the organization of China's overseas assistance is frequently understood to be highly centralized, in reality a multitude of non-state actors are involved as well, including civil society, academia, and the private sector.

More recently, China has also been investing heavily in the formation of various multilateral cooperation forums. In Africa, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) is one of the most prominent initiatives in the realm of peace and development. Under the umbrella of FOCAC, Chinese financial pledges to Africa have increased from \$5 billion in 2006 to \$60 billion in 2015. At last year's summit, President Xi Jinping proposed 10 overarching plans for Sino-African cooperation, covering almost all aspects of mutual economic ties: industry, agriculture, infrastructure, environment, trade facilitation, poverty alleviation, and public health.⁶ In addition, the China-Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security has been designated as a security initiative as part of FOCAC, which seeks to mitigate drivers of conflict. Achieving this objective will require further discussions on "how Beijing could move beyond rhetoric and support inclusive economic growth and development that could concretely contribute to reducing known root drivers of conflict."⁷

The Chinese vision of peace and development has been shaped profoundly by a long-standing history of foreign interventions and occupations by other nations. Indeed, with regard to China's view on post-conflict reconstruction, much of the country's activity is a fine balancing act between principle and pragmatism.⁸ Chinese peacebuilding efforts are supposed to be distinct from the Western liberal peace paradigm, so as to successfully exert its soft power overseas. Media aligned with Chinese interests are assigned a subtle, yet influential role in the positive framing of Chinese overseas assistance in Sudan, Chad, and other conflict-affected states.

In Chinese academic discourse, however, there has been little research on the Chinese role in peace and development. Although a shift is taking place toward a broader discussion, there is still a lack of knowledge and continued political sensitivity of security issues. Among Chinese scholars and officials, there is a general consensus that underdevelopment is the root cause of conflict, and that therefore socioeconomic development is considered a top priority wherever the Chinese set foot on land.⁹ It remains to be seen to what extent China's post-conflict reconstruction efforts benefit societies at large as opposed to favoring a handful of local elites.

Facts and Figures on Chinese Assistance

China's overseas assistance to conflict-affected countries has increased significantly over the past couple of years. Most of it has been realized through economic infrastructure projects. China published White Papers on Foreign Aid in 2011 and 2014. The 2014 paper provides an overview of US\$ 14.41 billion in foreign assistance in grants (36.2 percent), interest-free loans (8.1 percent), and concessional loans (55.7 percent) to 121 countries.¹⁰ At the same time, a number of African and Western aid experts have raised concerns about China's tendency to opt out of global aid reporting systems established by Western powers. Chinese development assistance has even been labeled as "rogue aid."¹¹ Whereas the lack of comparability in registration of figures has caused critics of China's development assistance to remain suspicious, researchers affiliated with AidData suggest that the Chinese aid strategy and implementation is "highly comparable to their Western counterparts."¹² In addition to a lack of accurate statistics, Lum, Fischer, Gomez-Granger, and Leland have highlighted problems concerning the appropriate demarcation of China's foreign aid activities across the globe:

"Some Chinese foreign assistance partially resembles official development assistance (ODA) as defined by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), but in other aspects shares characteristics of foreign investment. In terms of development grants, the primary form of assistance provided by major OECD countries, China is a relatively small source of global aid. However, when China's concessional loans and state-sponsored or subsidized overseas investments are included, the PRC becomes a major source of foreign aid."¹³

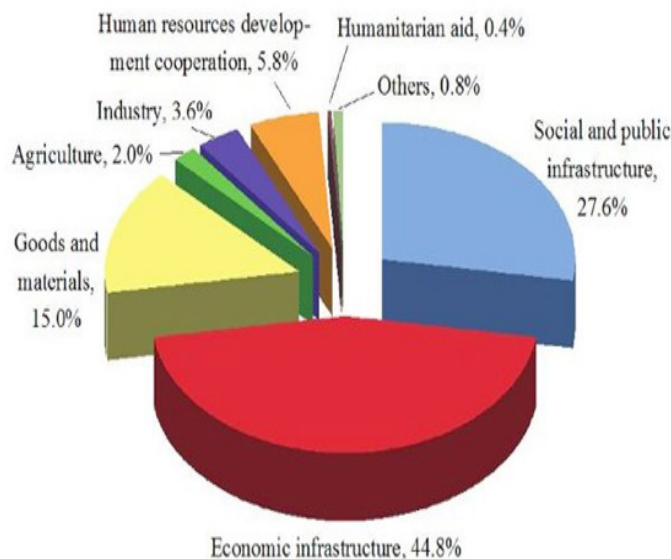
A RAND analysis published in 2015 suggests the following regional shares of total pledged Chinese assistance from 2001 through 2014 (in billions): Africa (\$330), Latin America (\$298), East Asia (\$192, excluding the bulk of China’s aid to North Korea), the Middle East (\$165), South Asia (\$157), and Central Asia (\$69).¹⁴ The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has produced a comprehensive overview of the figures relating to Chinese overseas assistance:

Facts on China’s development assistance



Empowered lives. Resilient nations.

Distribution of China’s Foreign Assistance Funds



Eight forms of development cooperation

- Turnkey projects,
- Commodity aid (goods and materials),
- Technical cooperation projects,
- Human resources development cooperation
- Chinese medical teams,
- Emergency humanitarian aid,
- Volunteer programmes
- Debt relief

Source: White Paper II (2014)



On the African continent, numerous countries have been impacted by Chinese post-conflict reconstruction assistance, including Angola, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Sudan, and Zimbabwe. Besides debt cancellations, zero-interest loans, infrastructure reconstruction, and public services provision, China has also offered options to boost employment in its wide array of post-conflict reconstruction methodologies. Fragile conditions of peace and security, however, pose significant risks to Chinese engagement in these areas, despite considerable support from Beijing.

To China, the relationship with Latin America is of less significance than China-Africa ties, considering the geographical distance, the United States' great influence, weak economic ties, cultural differences, and a lack of ground transportation.¹⁵ Compared with Africa and Asia, in Latin America China depends less on multilateral frameworks and instead focuses on four resource-rich countries: Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, and Ecuador. Slight fluctuations in Chinese political and economic engagement on other continents can be explained by the variable presence of other actors and the operating environment, as well as the relative importance of Chinese interests in these areas.

China's Increasing Role in U.N. Peacekeeping

In the realm of international peace and security, China's global ambitions have recently also started to permeate U.N. Peacekeeping endeavors. China's increased involvement in U.N. Peacekeeping should be regarded as an official expression of its commitment to the U.N. Charter and its security functions.¹⁶ Some scholars have identified China's multifaceted status as a great power and Global South state as the key cause of Chinese motivations for heightened engagement in U.N. Peacekeeping.¹⁷ Others have argued that China is stepping up its engagement in U.N. Peacekeeping as an alternative to the establishment and maintenance of military bases similar to those operated by the United States.¹⁸ The overarching Chinese rationale, however, is the proposition that unless it contributes to the "democratization of interstate relations," China will not be able to successfully leverage its global economic and political influence. Prior to the turn of the century, China had been approaching UN Peacekeeping with caution as the potential for international interference in Chinese domestic affairs (e.g., in Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang) had been a deterrent factor.

Concurrent with its desire to be seen as a responsible power, China is now becoming increasingly involved in the formulation of peacekeeping mandates and consequently has transitioned from being a norm-taker into a norm-maker.¹⁹ Certainly, recent Chinese troop contributions to the U.N. have been exemplary of this ongoing shift.

During the U.N. General Assembly of 2015, China's President Xi Jinping announced that the country will contribute 8,000 troops to a U.N. Peacekeeping standby force. Currently, China's largest contingent of peacekeepers is stationed in South Sudan, where it has considerable interests in the local oil industry.

The upsurge in Chinese peacekeeping troops can also be regarded as an act of consent toward the wish of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), which seeks to become more involved in noncombat military efforts such as humanitarian relief missions. In South Sudan, the combined deployment of Chinese infantrymen, medical personnel, and engineers is therefore also supposed to win the hearts and minds of the local citizens.²⁰ On the other hand, China's peacekeeping aspirations are being hampered by traditional views of state sovereignty and noninterference, as well as by the lack of bureaucratic capacity and political will.

In the long haul, China's expanding contribution to U.N. Peacekeeping could instigate a number of profound changes. U.N. Peacekeeping as an institution might potentially revert back to its traditional conception, and steer away from peace enforcement as a consequence of Chinese aversion to international interference in domestic affairs. Alternatively, the current Chinese position of noninterference might evolve over time, and peace enforcement may be continued without a Chinese veto.²¹ It is a good example of whether the rest of the world will see China's increased commitment as an opportunity or a threat.

Chinese Civil Society, Peace and Development, and Goal 16

China has been reforming since 1978. In trying to promote economic activity and growth, the Chinese government has gradually relaxed many controls over Chinese society and the daily life of its citizens. This has also created new space for social innovation and the way citizens can interact. Economic growth has contributed to a decline in poverty, but at the expense of greater inequalities. There are growing gaps between rich and poor and between urban and rural areas. Administrative and governing systems that were established for the planned economy no longer match this new social reality. Other challenges are created by the need to focus on safety and environmental sustainability.

The Chinese government is thus facing the challenge of how to manage and continue its overall success, while accommodating and responding to a number of problems. Overall, the approach of the government toward Chinese civil society aims to develop a systematic framework to manage social problems.²²

Within this context, the Chinese government has started to enable a space for different forms of social organizations, however with various levels of state control still being exercised. Chinese civil society can thus be perceived as an organized civil sphere that comes into being by gradually “growing away” from the state, as it increasingly obtains different levels of independence. Historically, this is a path of civil society development very different from that of many Western countries, where there was often an independent civil sphere before nation-states were formed, as well as countries where civil society has been a sphere to organize civil concern and identity in the face of colonial oppression. Social organizations have grown rapidly in China. At the moment, there are about 600,000 registered social organizations, fulfilling a host of different developmental functions. They represent 9.7 percent of GDP and have created 12 million jobs.²³

From a legal perspective, social organizations are normally subject to registration and dual administration. Any social organization in China must register at the level of government within which the organization operates (i.e., national organizations at the national level, provincial at the provincial level, and so forth). In addition, it is required to register both with the designated registration authority (the Ministry of Civil Affairs system) and with a professional supervisory unit. An organization wishing to work for a mission related to health care must register, for example, with a hospital; an educational organization with a university; etc. The professional supervisory organization is commonly known as the “Godmother” of a social organization. Recently, the government has started to experiment with a single administration system, in which social organizations no longer need a “Godmother.”

A new foreign NGO law has recently been approved by the National People’s Congress, and stipulates that “any group wishing to operate in China must register with public security officials.”²⁴ The law is seen in Western media and human rights organizations as yet another example of more repression. However, a different view of the law and its implications is also possible: The law can be perceived as a tactical move in a long-term strategy for the state to gain as much benefit, and minimize as much risk, from the NGO sector as possible. More regulation of the NGO sector is often viewed as a potential threat to fundamental freedoms. But regulation can also mean inclusion in the system and thus an acknowledgment of an organization’s existence.²⁵ The question is again whether to perceive the actions of the Chinese government as creating an opportunity or a threat?

The U.N.’s shift from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) allows for a discussion of Chinese civil society’s role in supporting the new “peace goal” (Goal 16) in the SDGs. From 2000 to 2015, China made very significant progress on most of the MDGs. The success of the MDGs globally can to a large extent be attributed to the success of China. This contrasts sharply with what has occurred in most

conflict-affected countries, which did not manage to make much progress on achieving the MDGs. This contrasting experience gave birth to the mantra that there can be “no peace without development.” In China, this is seen as underscoring the relevance and success of the Chinese experience in past decades.

Chinese society has experienced major violent conflicts and upheavals in the past 100 years, including external invasion, civil war, and widespread domestic political unrest. The current Chinese leadership has a collective memory of the Cultural Revolution. There is thus a strong and widely shared sentiment grounded in recent history of the risks that come with the use of violence and the suffering and costs that violence may incur.

The careful approach to violence is reflected in the use of language. Some would say this is inspired as well by a dominant Confucian culture that is inclined to stress harmony rather than dissent. As a result, much of the language used at international levels to describe violent conflict is rarely used in China. The word “conflict” itself and related terms like “conflict prevention” or “conflict management” are not part of the common vocabulary. Instead, Chinese discourse will emphasize words like “stability,” “healthy social relations,” or “the promotion of a harmonious society.” The term “building peaceful and inclusive societies” can be connected to this discourse and thus adds to the truly universal appeal of Goal 16, the importance of which can hardly be underestimated.

The recent Chinese government position paper on the implementation of Goal 16 is quite explicit in stressing “peaceful development” as the first general principle, and calling for the inclusion of civil society as part of an “all-around partnership” with governments, international organizations, and the private sector.²⁶ Finally, the role of civil society and the preservation of religious rights will also be crucial in ensuring the success of the aforementioned economic cooperation regimes.²⁷

Conclusions and Recommendations

This policy brief has sought to shed light on the rise of China and the challenges and opportunities it creates in the sphere of conflict prevention, post-conflict reconstruction, and peacebuilding. Initially providing an overview of China's global political and economic ambitions, the main focus has been on examining the role of China in contributing to international peace and security. Across the globe, China has forged several multilateral frameworks aimed at improving political and economic ties, while stepping up its commitment to established multilateral institutions such as the United Nations. In China, but particularly abroad, disagreement continues to exist on how to interpret these new geopolitical dynamics. Primarily Western observers have asserted that China's benign framing of its foreign policy agenda is merely a cover-up for an aggressive attempt at safeguarding China's national interests.

Such arguments can be questioned, however, when one considers the intent of Western foreign aid initiatives and their connectedness to national interests. From an African perspective, China and Western countries both promote their self-interest in the provision of foreign assistance. China's approach to foreign aid, however, differs from Western countries in some ways. The Chinese focus on peace and development is grounded in a balance between principle and pragmatism, with an emphasis on noninterference in the domestic affairs of other countries. As China sets up new cooperation regimes while side-lining others, some have designated the Chinese strategy as "selective multilateralism." The country has pledged hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of development assistance, as well as major troop contributions to U.N. peacekeeping. While Chinese foreign aid intentions are likely to be more altruistic than outside observers would like to admit, it remains to be seen to what extent citizens in conflict-affected regions will benefit from these initiatives as opposed to local elites.

Most importantly, a more nuanced understanding of China's approach to peace and development is required, particularly in the West. Rather than viewing Chinese efforts to support peace and development as a threat, they deserve to be regarded as an opportunity. In our view, continuous dialogue between Chinese and foreign policymakers is needed to ensure the prospects for improved cooperation. Ultimately, the successful integration of China into international peace and development discourse, and into effective multilateral institutions, will be of great benefit to all stakeholders involved. There is ample room for civil society collaboration and engagement with these dynamics, to contribute to a shared responsibility that can have a significant impact on preventing violence and the building prosperity of conflict-affected states, rising powers and established powers alike.

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