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China's Engagement in Conflict and Post-Conflict Settings: The Quest for Stability

Bernardo Mariani

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Abstract

This paper finds that China's vision of addressing violent conflicts and security challenges differs substantially from those of Western countries. China seeks stability, rather than peace, and Chinese diplomats tend to avoid references to terms such as peacemaking and peacebuilding (with the exception of discussions around the UN). China's economic development, and connectivity and trade needs - especially along the path of the Belt and Road Initiative - drive Chinese engagement in conflict and post-conflict settings. Once there, rather than actively pursuing peace, China seeks stability, especially in contexts where it has major financial and geostrategic interests.

The engagement of China with conflicts in Africa, Asia and the Middle East shows a gradual process of policy evolution aimed at reconciling old foreign policy principles - particularly those of non-interference and state sovereignty - with the need to ensure the security and safety of its assets and nationals overseas and the international demands of an increased global role. The closer that fragile countries are to China and the more important economic and security factors are, the more willing China is to use its influence and adopt a more interventionist approach. This is either through special envoys or setting the table for peace talks.

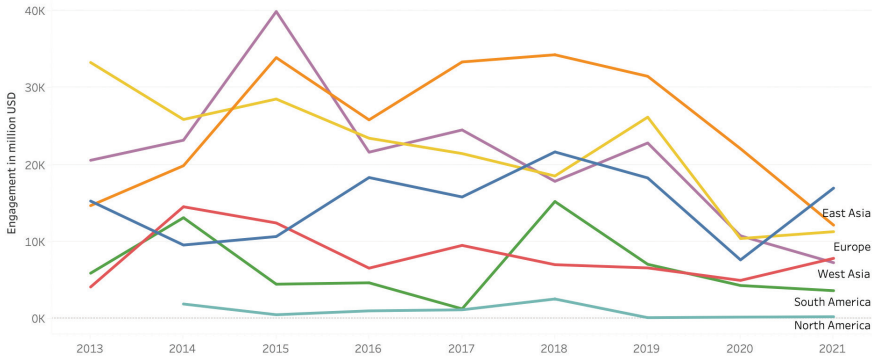
In its engagement in conflict and post-conflict settings, China has adopted a strategy of encouraging its interlocutors to learn from China's own experiences. It spurs them to work towards a "developmental peace", a model whereby achieving peace hinges on development and economic growth. In contrast to the canons of liberal peacebuilding, which put an emphasis on tackling the root causes of conflict through promoting democracy, the rule of law, and market liberalism, China's peacebuilding model instead puts emphasis on restoring social order, political stability, and physical reconstruction. China has a transformational vision of its role in global governance. Such a vision challenges the validity and applicability of Western conceptions of peacemaking and peacebuilding in so far as it seeks to reshape and weaken global norms around human rights and democracy promotion. Further, it strives to push for more economic, development and stability initiatives over those which promote good governance, rule of law, democracy, or respect for political and social rights.

Introduction

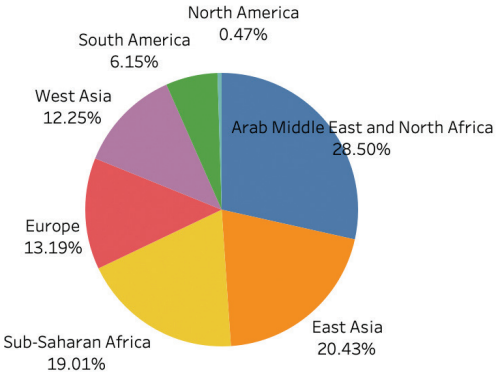
In a changing global security environment, with economic and political influence shifting from Western countries to other regions, China has emerged not only as a world-class economic powerhouse, but also as a global peace and security actor. The pursuit of natural resources and the search for new markets and investment opportunities has led to an increase in Chinese investment—both private and state-directed—in environments that are characterised by fragility and conflict (CGIT, 2022). This has encouraged China to increasingly engage in peace and security initiatives it had previously shunned.
Over the past 20 years, through shuttle diplomacy, peacekeeping and development projects, amongst others, China has become increasingly engaged in crisis diplomacy, conflict mediation, UN peace operations and post-conflict reconstruction in countries such as Afghanistan, Congo DRC, East Timor, Liberia, Mali, Myanmar, Sierra Leone, Sudan and South Sudan.

China's engagement with fragile and conflict-affected countries has further increased after the 2013 launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global infrastructure development programme that has become the most significant Chinese initiative in conflict settings. Although the details outlining the full scale and scope of the initiative remain ambiguous, the programme ultimately aims to stimulate growth and boost trade through mass investment in international infrastructure projects. To date, the BRI spans through over 140 countries spread across all continents (Nedopil, 2022). Numerous BRI-related investments are concentrated in highly fragile and conflict-prone environments, with large tracts of the BRI's "corridors" crossing areas where political and ethnic tensions have often led to violence. In such contexts, the economic weight of Chinese BRI investment has tremendous implications, not only for Chinese businesses and the development prospects of recipient countries, but also for local peace and security dynamics, as it affects domestic power balances, economic development, and peacebuilding prospects.

Chinese BRI engagement across different regions 2013-2021



Chinese BRI investment and cooperation 2021 by region



Growth/decline of BRI engagement in different regions

		2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Sub-Saharan Africa	Construction	15%	-10%	-2%	-33%	32%	-49%	-21%
	Investment	-2%	-43%	-41%	150%	63%	-81%	156%
Arab Middle East and North Africa	Construction	9%	59%	-23%	43%	-28%	-44%	116%
	Investment		742%	85%	11%	52%	-96%	361%
West Asia	Construction	84%	-46%	41%	-45%	20%	-56%	-3%
	Investment	51%	-46%	-49%	84%	42%	-48%	-70%
South America	Construction	-4%	-28%	-76%	84%	-67%	-33%	643%
	Investment	-94%	242%	-66%	2,187%	-52%	-39%	-61%
East Asia	Construction	17%	31%	-14%	24%	-13%	-15%	-33%
	Investment	114%	-49%	78%	-9%	-4%	-40%	-56%
Europe	Construction	-85%	560%	22%	12%	46%	-11%	106%
	Investment	-3%	-62%	55%	-39%	-38%	-44%	-56%
North America	Construction	17%	0%	119%	119%	-94%	44%	22%
	Investment	-100%		-100%				

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Through its engagement in regions affected by conflict and instability, China articulates a different vision of addressing violent conflict and security challenges and the ways to achieve stability through a developmental path. This vision is largely shaped by its own domestic experience, and the historical legacy of Western imperial interventions and the Cold War. While the desire in Western countries to engage with conflict-affected regions appears to be declining, China's peace involvement in conflict settings is gaining prominence, both at a normative level, where China challenges the validity and applicability of the liberal norms that guide Western peacemaking, and an operational one.

This article aims to provide insight into the following research questions:

1. How does China approach violent conflict and security challenges, and how does it conceptualise its peace engagement?

2. What are the policy priorities, interests and concerns of China's engagement in conflict-affected countries?

3. How does China put its peace model into practice in different regions of the world?

The paper begins with an overview of key terms and definitions, then proceeds with an analysis of the rationale and motivations underpinning China's engagement in conflict-affected countries. This is followed by a review of existing policies and their adaptation to the new realities of an increasingly multipolar security environment, and China's growing global footprint. I then identify the characteristics of Chinese engagement in conflict management and post-conflict reconstruction, based on evidence of China's practices both in its near abroad and further afield. Finally, with the aim of contributing to research and debates on the vision and agency of future peacemaking and peacebuilding, my conclusions consider strengths and weaknesses of Chinese engagement in conflict and post-conflict settings, pointing to possible future research avenues.

Methodology

This research is based on a review of secondary sources including official Chinese policy documents, peer-reviewed articles, expert publications in the English and Chinese literature, and an analysis of observations in Chinese and Western media. This is in addition to data acquired through eight semi-structured interviews with Chinese scholars, think tank experts, and diplomats, as well as with two Western analysts. To stimulate free and candid discussions and to protect confidentiality, in line with the approved ethics protocols of the project, the names of some of the interviewees and their institutions have been withheld.

Key findings and recommendations

- Over the past 20 years, China has increased its presence and influence across many unstable and/or conflict-affected regions where it holds economic and political influence. The key factor driving China's engagement in conflict-affected environments is its own development and economic expansion, especially along the path of the Belt and Road Initiative. Other drivers - including the responsibility to protect Chinese citizens working abroad, internal security concerns, geopolitics and China's growing aspiration to be seen as a responsible global power - have their merits as additional lenses through which to examine China's engagement in conflict-affected environments. Through the official discourses and actual practices on the ground, China articulates a particular vision of how to engage in conflict-affected and fragile contexts and how to achieve stability. This vision challenges the validity and applicability of Western peacemaking and peacebuilding in so far as economic, development and stability initiatives take much higher priority over initiatives promoting good governance, rule of law, democracy, or respect for political and social rights. The key elements of China's engagement in conflict-affected contexts are:

    - Rather than actively pursuing peace per se, China seeks stability, especially in contexts where it has major financial and geostrategic interests. In China's outward projection of its own domestic experiences, the early stages of nation-building require stability, which is contingent on a competent and strong state authority.

    - Development is a sufficient precondition for peace. Few in the West would deny that development is an important factor in sustaining peace. However, in contrast to Western-led "liberal peace" concepts - with their focus on good governance, free markets and protection of political rights - for the Chinese "developmental peace" (发展和平 *fāzhǎn hépíng*) concept, prioritising economic development is the crucial precondition of a sustainable internal peace. The concept emphasises development led by infrastructure construction, poverty alleviation, and investments in education, health and other public services. These all strengthen national identity, promote social solidarity, and contribute to stable governance.

- Local solutions to local problems, and promotion of the Chinese model. By maintaining that those directly affected by conflict have the primary responsibility for resolving conflicts and choosing their development paths, the Chinese traditional approach emphasises local solutions to local problems. However, China also simultaneously promotes a "Chinese solutions discourse", which hinges on the superiority of the Chinese model and the applicability of Chinese practices in other settings.

- Diplomatic persuasion, rather than punishments. China has a historic distaste for sanctions and other restrictive measures and punishments, which it equates to interference in other countries' domestic affairs. Instead, it favours diplomatic persuasion and compromise.

- The pursuit of multipolarity and the transformation of global governance. China is committed to pursuing a multi-polar world order, but it has also articulated a vision for global governance. This vision is meant to signal a break from the current world order, with an increasing number of countries connected more strongly to China and supporting Chinese national interests.

- China's engagement with regions of instability and conflict is undergoing a gradual process of evolution aimed at reconciling old foreign policy principles with the demands of an increased global role in the international system. In cases where civil conflicts threaten regional security and stability, or where its economic and security interests are at stake, China has pursued more interventionist initiatives. For example, in Afghanistan, Myanmar, Sudan and South Sudan, China has leveraged its political and economic influence to position itself as a mediator and bring parties together. It has made commitments with African states and multilateral institutions - such as the African Union - to focus on addressing issues of peace and security and is also playing increasingly important roles in UN peace operations. The war in Ukraine has prompted international calls for China to use its influence with Russia to mediate a cessation of the hostilities. While it remains to be seen whether China will eventually rise to the occasion, China's crisis diplomacy and mediation history offer precedents and options for a potential mediation role in Ukraine. As China's global economic and political footprint grows alongside its involvement in countries where peace is fragile, engaging China on issues related to peace and security is crucial to tackling the drivers of conflict and to finding common ground on which to build peace and security cooperation. With significant transformative potential for conflict environments where both China and Western countries are engaged, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provides a potential confluence of interests between China and the West. For China, the business viability of the BRI is linked to greater peace and stability in the countries it passes through. Collaborative research projects with Chinese scholars studying how the BRI is transforming conflict environments, either positively or negatively, would allow for a better understanding of how Chinese agency affects peace building, as well as deriving practical suggestions for better coordination between actors to mitigate the adverse effects of the initiative.

Key terms and definitions

Chinese definitions of peacemaking (建立和平, *jiànlì hépíng*) and peacebuilding (建设和平, *jiànshè hépíng*) are based on the working terminologies used in the UN system. A distinction must be made, however, between the use of peacemaking and peacebuilding by the Chinese academic literature and the governmental policy discourse around peace and conflict. While there is a familiarity with the terminology of peacemaking and peacebuilding among Chinese academics who are using it when participating in international debates, and who are also trying to develop Chinese approaches in these areas (He, 2017; Meng 2017, Li 2018), statements from Chinese officials and diplomats are more circumspect and hardly mention peacemaking and peacebuilding. In many Chinese official statements, "peace" is often accompanied by modifiers such as "sustaining", "supporting" and "safeguarding", rather than "building", or "making" (Yang, 2021; The State Council of the People's Republic of China [SCPRC], 2021; Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN in Geneva, 2005). In fact, most Chinese officials tend to avoid such expressions, other than within the context of the UN system or regional and sub-regional institutions —for example, the African Union - which are considered to have legitimacy on matters of—conflict and security. As one international analyst pointed out, the concepts of peacemaking and peacebuilding are not fully accepted in China at the official level and therefore they are not referenced prominently in the formal statements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' spokespersons when dwelling on China's involvement in conflict hotspots. These terms are also hardly mentioned by Chinese envoys or other diplomats who are involved in mediation or other peace promoting activities (Tower, 2022). Moreover, very few Chinese civil society actors – be they scholars or think tank experts - refer to themselves as peace practitioners.

The formal official discourse in China focuses on peaceful development, peace through development, and how economic development is a mechanism for addressing conflict (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China, 2022; Zhang, 2022; Fenghe, 2021; SCPRC, 2021, 2019, 2011; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China [MFAPRC], 2021, 2015). One of the challenges affecting policy dialogue on peace with China is separating some of the approaches that might fall under the peacemaking and peacebuilding toolkit from particularly Chinese discourses around preventing interventions by foreign actors and a strong Chinese resistance to activities promoting democracy and human rights. Chinese hesitance to use these terms is linked to the realisation that liberal peacemaking and peacebuilding imply social change and conflict transformation. Practices such as these are very contentious within the Chinese social science space because they have become synonymous with imposing Western values on weak states, or, worse, legitimising military intervention and undermining state sovereignty.

There are also no clear-cut definitions of conflict prevention (预防冲突, *yùfáng chōngtú*) or conflict resolution (解决冲突, *jiějué chōngtú*) from a Chinese perspective, and there is little consensus on what they mean. Terms such as "hotspots" or "hotspot issues" seem to be the preferred alternative terminology in China's official discourses when referring to conflict areas. In December 2021, the Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi, spoke about China's approaches to tackling hotspot issues during an interview with the Chinese media and stressed the responsibilities that major countries shoulder for world peace and stability, indicating that they should:

- uphold justice, not seek selfish interests;
- promote peace, not abuse the use of force;
- encourage dialogue, not resort to wilful sanctions; and
- respect the views of the countries concerned, not throw their weight around (MFAPRC, 2021; Wang, 2021).

One explanation offered for China's reluctance to use conflict prevention and conflict resolution terminologies is that they imply an in-depth analysis of all the different stakeholders in a conflict, and draw on interventionist approaches that explore how to potentially change something about that context, so that it could be transformed (Tower, 2022).

However, in the first position paper on UN reform by the Chinese Government in 2005, it was stated that "China supports the establishment of the 'prevention culture' by the UN and larger input into conflict prevention and mediation, especially the improvement of mechanisms and measures such as early warning and fact-finding missions" (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, 2005. At the 2021 UNSC open debate on peace and security through preventive diplomacy China's Permanent Representative, Ambassador Zhang Jun, spoke about the key for effective preventive diplomacy as having a systematic strategy, making full use of all available means such as good offices and mediation, strengthening early warning mechanism and supporting the UN Secretary-General's role. He reiterated that "preventive diplomacy cannot and must not become a pretext for interference in domestic affairs" (Zhang, 2021). A review of China's statements on conflict prevention and conflict resolution at the UNSC in the past 15 years shows the following key elements to China's approach: "resolving disputes through peaceful means such as dialogue and consultation", "addressing root causes of conflicts and prioritising development", and "supporting regional and subregional organisations" (Ma, 2018; Liu, 2017; Zhenmin, 2007).

While not embracing the concept of "conflict resolution", the 2019 White Paper by the Ministry of Defence on *China's National Defense in the New Era* highlights China's role "in the political settlements of hotspot issues" (SCPRC, 2019). In practice, however, Chinese diplomacy efforts, especially when China is involved as a peace-broker in regional affairs, are mainly aimed at keeping peace and stability and managing conflicts, rather than taking preventative actions.

Rationale and motivations for China's engagement in conflict-affected countries

Diverse factors drive China's engagement in conflict-affected environments:

- First and foremost, China's own development and economic expansion. The pursuit of energy security, minerals and agricultural raw materials, together with the search for new markets to sustain high rates of domestic economic growth has led to a significant increase of Chinese investment overseas. Chinese businesses therefore often operate in environments offering substantial natural resources, as well as new markets for Chinese exports, environments that are often characterised by fragility and conflict. Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs), especially those operating in mining and energy extraction, and infrastructure development, have traditionally aligned their expansion plans with China's national priorities, and have played a dominant role in the "going out" drive (Alon et al, 2014; Jones & Zou, 2017; Alden, 2011) and in implementing China's ambitious BRI. However, one interviewee also highlighted the role played by Chinese private entrepreneurs in China's internationalisation drive. These entrepreneurs often set up various types of businesses in contexts that are either starting to emerge from conflict, or which are still in the midst of conflict. Notably, these are contexts where there are tremendous opportunities to obtain concessions to extract natural resources, or to engage in a wide range of other business activities. Such entrepreneurs act as "pull factors", providing incentives for other Chinese stakeholders to move in. Eventually, given the presence of Chinese capital, networks, companies, and various Chinese stakeholders that might have built capacities, knowledge and presence in those countries, China gets involved at a governmental level in initiatives aimed at not only advancing the interests of Chinese investors, but also leveraging some of the economic relationships to gain political advantages or to serve other geopolitical goals (Tower, 2022).

Aside from private entrepreneurs, China is also willing to leverage significant state-sponsored development strategies. Since 2013, through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—a vast development strategy aimed at establishing an infrastructure and trade network connecting Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe—China has become significantly more involved in regions affected by instability and conflict. The latest report by the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation (CAITEC) of the Chinese Ministry of Commerce provides an overview on the growth of trade and investment between China and the countries along the BRI in the past nine years. According to the report, the value of the trade in goods between China and BRI countries increased from USD1.04 trillion in 2013 to USD1.34 trillion in 2020 (with a total amount of USD9.2 trillion for this period), and the value of trade in services increased from USD74.84 billion in 2015 to USD84.47 billion in 2020 (CAITEC, 2021).

- Secondly, domestic pressure to protect Chinese citizens living and working abroad. This pressure was evident after 2004 when numerous Chinese nationals were victims of attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sudan. In 2006, a special division was set up under the Department of Consular Affairs within the Chinese foreign ministry to provide consular assistance and protection to overseas Chinese citizens and entities. Just one year later, the division was upgraded to become the Centre for Consular Assistance and Protection and has been equipped with more resources to meet the increasing demand for its services (*Xinhua News Agency*, 2006). Similarly, in 2011 there was another surge in pressure on the Chinese Government to protect oversees citizens. In March of that year, the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) was dispatched for its first non-combatant evacuation operation to evacuate Chinese citizens from Libya as conflict erupted in the country. Later that year, thirteen Chinese sailors were killed on the borders of Myanmar and Thailand in an area notorious for drug smuggling (*BBC*, 2011). A public outcry compelled the Chinese authorities to take action to better secure the region. As a result, China joined forces with Laos, Myanmar and Thailand to increase and coordinate security patrols and law enforcement within the region (Marshall, 2012). The responsibility to protect Chinese citizens was emphasised in a 2013 Defence White Paper on "The diversified employment of China's armed forces" (SCPRC, 2013) and has been reiterated in the subsequent 2015 defence White Paper (SCPRC, 2015).

The current case of Cambodia - where kidnappings of Chinese and other foreign nationals by Chinese criminal gangs appear to have spiralled out of control *(New Straits Times, 2022; Phnom Penh Post, 2020; Khmer Times, 2021; Radio Free Asia, 2019)* - presents a new, and extremely difficult challenge to protecting Chinese citizens living and working abroad.

- Thirdly, internal security concerns. China's engagement with conflict-affected countries, especially neighbouring countries, is also shaped by its domestic security outlook, an expanded and all-encompassing concept of national security (Legarda, 2021). There is an additional concern that cross-border environments might foster conflict and instability which could affect China. For example, ethnic conflict, misfired shells, and refugees from Myanmar have often spilled into China's border regions. This has prompted China to engage in diplomatic efforts and dialogue to help manage the conflict and prevent an escalation. There are also concerns about Central Asia, given the potential impact on China's domestic security of Islamist extremist groups from the region extending activities into the Chinese region of Xinjiang and/or providing support for Uighur separatist groups, such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM).

- Fourthly, geopolitics and China's growing aspirations as a responsible global power. How China operates overseas, and the extent to which it works in a responsible manner, is increasingly in the international spotlight. One Chinese interviewee points out that "as a permanent member of the UNSC, China cannot just 'talk the talk' but not 'walk the walk'; it needs to take action to fulfil its international obligations and maintain the global security order" (Interview 3). As China's prominence on the world stage increases, there is, on the one hand, pressure from the international community for China to play a more proactive role in the management and prevention of conflict and, on the other, China's acceptance that such engagement improves its international image and helps it achieve a balance with other major players, particularly the US.

In recent years, terms of so-called "Chinese solutions" or "Chinese proposals" (中国方案, *zhōngguó fāngàn*) have been repeatedly used in the official discourse to describe China's diplomatic philosophy and approach to global challenges. First mentioned in 2013 after the G20 Summit *(People's Daily*, 2014*)*, it was during a speech at the UN in 2017 that President Xi further elaborated on the Chinese proposal to "build a community of shared future for mankind and achieve shared and win-win development" (Xi, 2017). Since then, this term has been increasingly used as China's response to a variety of issues of global governance. The frequent reference to "Chinese solutions" shows that China is becoming increasingly confident in its practices in governance and development and believes its own experiences are of global relevance, if not applicability. During the Trump presidency in particular, President Xi sought to position China as a constructive actor on the global stage, in line with the long-term objective of turning China into a global power by 2049 (Legarda, 2018). Because of these growing global ambitions, Chinese diplomats are involved in more mediation and regional negotiation efforts than in previous decades (ibid).

The motivations presented here all have merits as different lenses through which to examine China's engagement in conflict-affected environments. To focus on one at the expense of the others would be to oversimplify a complex situation with priorities that have ebbed and flowed, and different issues that have gained prominence at different times and in different locations. As we will see in the section below, one can identify a tendency towards approaches that marry principle with pragmatism (*Saferworld*, 2015).

Normative principles and guiding policies

While Western countries, donors from OECD-DAC, and international financial institutions —such as the World Bank—have adopted policies regulating their engagement in conflict environments, China does not have policies focussing specifically on conflict management, peacemaking or peacebuilding, although its institutionalized peacekeeping and development policies cover some of these issues. China's engagement in fragile and/or conflict-affected states to date has predominantly been ad-hoc, reactive, and context specific rather than driven by specific written policies.

However, peace promotion features highly in China's contemporary policy discourse regarding international relations. Since 2008, China's national Defence White Papers have made several references to promoting "peace" (SCPRC, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2019). They offer insights into how China perceives its role as a global peace and security actor, echoing the Chinese official prominence placed on peace and development. They also emphasise the long-standing foreign policy principles that steer China's engagement in the international arena and its diplomatic philosophy. In particular, the "five principles of peaceful coexistence" are the cornerstone of Chinese foreign policy (MFAPRC, 2004; Wen 2004; SCPRC, 2019). They include:

1. Mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty
2. Mutual non-aggression
3. Mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs
4. Equality and co-operation for mutual benefit and
5. Peaceful co-existence.

These principles date back to the beginning of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and were agreed to by China and India in 1954. They were later endorsed by the leaders of many newly independent former colonies as a counterweight to Western global governance. In line with such principles, and shaped by China's history—including the legacy of external interventions, colonialism, and hegemonic power domination—China has long pledged its commitment to policies of non-interference, non-intervention, and respect for state sovereignty, all while framing relationships with conflict-affected states in collaborative and non-hierarchical terms (Paczynska, 2021).

The combined dynamics of global aspirations, growing overseas investments, and business links in fragile and/or conflict-affected countries, and the demand to protect investments and Chinese citizens, have put pressure on China to re-evaluate its stance on non-interference and consider more interventionist policies (Chaziza, 2018). Moreover, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and the second global biggest economy, China's international reputation is at stake, along with pressure to play an increased role in the international system and to address international peace and security challenges.

Over the past ten years, policy debates on intervention, promoting peace, and non-interference have gathered momentum. The need to respond to particular challenges has led China to abandon a strict twentieth century reactive stance in favour of more "gradualist forms of engagement" (Alden & Large, 2015). Alden and Large describe such a process as China becoming a "norms maker" (ibid). Particularly in Africa, the most notable test case (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2017), China has moved beyond the constraints of its traditional hand-off policy and rhetoric grounded in the principle of non-interference towards practices that allow it to act as a security actor (ibid).

The pragmatic adaptation of the concept of non-interference (Cui, 2012) (in what has been termed "creative involvement" (Wang, 2011) and "responsible protection" (Ruan, 2012) has allowed China to engage in mediation and shuttle diplomacy (*Beijing Review*, 2012). Since 2002, China has set up mechanisms of special envoys or representatives to mediate conflicts and tensions in the Middle East, Africa, the Korean Peninsula, Asia, Afghanistan and Syria. Special envoys focus on long-term good offices and are very flexible, so as to work with multiple actors including foreign officials, international organisations, and media and non-governmental organisations (Cui, 2020). Creative involvement has also enabled China to go beyond its traditional approach of only engaging with government actors and to reach out to non-state actors and opposition groups—albeit on an incremental, ad-hoc basis—as has been the case in Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Myanmar. Creative involvement envisages the proactive use of diplomatic, military and commercial routes altogether, and can involve sending humanitarian and poverty relief teams abroad. It emphasises that Chinese engagement should be cautious, creative and constructive, rather than pursuing Western-style policies. Non-interference as a guiding foreign policy principle will not fade from Chinese policy statements in the near future, given its important role as a legitimising tool for international action and its facilitation of South-South diplomacy. However, the trend towards a more flexible interpretation of that principle when it comes to operationalising foreign policy is now well-established.

After the controversy over the scope of NATO's military action in Libya in 2011, China's opposition to the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norm and, in particular, Pillar 3—which elaborates on the obligation of the international community to take action if a state does not fulfil its obligations to protect its population—has led to normative debates and Chinese efforts to reinterpret R2P and military intervention for humanitarian purposes (Garwood-Gowers, 2016). Although the views of China and Western donors on the notion of sovereignty as responsibility continue to diverge, especially after the war in Libya and China's concern that the norm may be applied selectively and arbitrarily (Yuan, 2020), there have been sporadic cases of convergence. China has endorsed robust and intrusive UN Security Council peacekeeping mandates in Congo DRC, South Sudan and Mali, which acknowledge the limitations of absolute sovereignty and include commitments to protect civilians threatened by violence emanating from the parties engaged in conflict (United Nations Security Council [UNSC] 2010, 2014). However, China remains cautious and its endorsement generally relates to Pillars 1 and 2, which focus on state responsibility to protect its population from mass atrocities and the responsibility of the international community to encourage and assist states in doing so (Fung, 2016). In 2012, one Chinese scholar denounced NATO intervention in Libya as a misuse of the concept of R2P and introduced instead the Chinese concept of "Responsible Protection", which emphasises the role of the UNSC as the only legitimate actor to authorize the provision of such protection. It also holds that the means of "protection" should be non-military, and the "protectors" should also be held responsible for the post-"intervention" and post-"protection" reconstruction of the state concerned (Ruan, 2012).

The role of different actors in making and implementing policies

Numerous, often-disparate Chinese actors engage in foreign policy making and implementation as they relate to China's overseas peace and security engagement. The seven-person Politburo Standing Committee of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) is the main decision maker responsible for approving largely country- or region-specific policies related to peace and security, with support from the State Council. The Central Foreign Affairs Commission under the CPC Central Committee is in charge of the top-level design, overall planning and coordination of China's foreign policy and supervision of its implementation. The Commission is headed by the President and Vice President, and its members include the Vice Premier or the State Councilor in charge of foreign affairs, the ministers of Foreign Affairs, National Defence, Commerce, Public Security and State Security; the directors of the Taiwan Affairs Office, the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, and the Information Office of the State Council; the heads of the Publicity Department and the International Department of the CPC Central Committee; and senior officers from the military. There is another similar Commission under CPC's Central Committee, namely the Central National Security Commission (CNSC, established in 2013 as the decision-making and deliberative coordinating body of the CPC Central Committee) that is responsible to the Central Political Bureau and its Standing Committee for matters related to national security. The two Commissions are reported to have similar members. As one can tell from their composition, these two Commissions are not permanent bodies, but serve as a coordinating mechanism for decision making.

Party and state departments prominent in the policy formation process include the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the Central Military Commission (CMC), the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Prominent think tanks and universities feed into the process, as do significant state-owned enterprises, such as the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and Sinopec. MOFCOM and the MFA tend to be the key actors in policy implementation, although which ministry takes the lead can vary depending on the specific foreign intervention.

Particularly evident is that when challenges in China's immediate periphery arise—although not always limited to this—China is far from being a unitary actor, as there are a range of bodies that might shape a response in a particular setting. In Myanmar, for example, there are some key distinctions to make about the role and impact of Communist Party vs. government institutions, the activities of private investors, the way in which China influences or mobilizes ethnic Chinese communities to become involved in addressing certain issues, and the role of business associations and sub-national government actors, which add significant complexity into China's responses (Tower, 2022).

Approaches and solutions to peace

Although not codified in any official policy document, a number of "Chinese solutions" and approaches have emerged from China's engagement in conflict-affected contexts:

- Development leads to peace. This has been dubbed "developmental peace" (He, 2017, 2019; Wang, 2018; Abb, 2018) (发展和平, *fāzhǎn hépíng*), a fundamental concept of the Chinese peacebuilding model. All respondents generally agreed that China views underdevelopment as the root cause of instability, hence China's emphasis on the central role of development at all phases of the conflict cycle. Economic and social development is essential to addressing the root causes and drivers of conflict and to achieving sustainable peace. Central to this mindset are two vital considerations for China: stability and development. In contrast to Western-led "liberal peace" concepts—with their focus on liberal democratic governing systems and protection of political rights—the Chinese "developmental peace", or "development-focused governance" puts emphasis on development led by infrastructure construction, poverty alleviation, investment in education, health and other public services and other measures that strengthen national identity, promote social solidarity and contribute to stable governance. According to this concept, political rights are seen as secondary to economic ones and are not the means to promote economic growth. According to one Chinese interviewee, Western countries put too much emphasis on liberal democratic governance, while "China believes that it is difficult to have a one-size-fits-all political system because of the different conditions of each country; therefore, it supports countries to explore and choose political systems and development paths that are in line with their own specific conditions" (Interview 1).

- Stability and a strong state authority. Sustainable growth requires stability and stability is contingent on a competent and strong state authority. In China's outward projection of its own domestic experiences (Xinyu, 2020), the early stages of nation-building require a strong regime. There tends to be an understanding that economic and development activities are inherently stabilising factors, whereas good governance and democracy promotion are instead more uncertain and may become destabilising elements (Tower, 2022). In the view of one Chinese interviewee, placing too much emphasis on legitimacy and "good governance", as Western countries tend to do, may come at the cost of stability (Interview 1).

- Local solutions to local problems and Chinese solutions. There is a close correlation between the norm of non-interference and classical Westphalian notions of sovereignty and the Chinese approach. The latter holds that those directly affected have the primary responsibility for resolving conflicts and choosing their development paths, while outside forces can only play a secondary role in fostering peace. According to several respondents, China believes that local governments and their people have the wisdom and ability to resolve domestic conflict and therefore it supports other countries in exploring solutions that are in line with their conditions (Interviews 1, 7 and 9). However, "China is willing to exchange experiences with those countries on governance and development, to encourage an inclusive political process and to provide humanitarian assistance without any political conditions (ibid)". The main argument as to why China's experience is transferable is because China, a developing country, has brought nearly 800 million people out of extreme poverty (*Xinhua*, 2021). This argument, which is used to sell the superiority of the Chinese model over the Western approach, if often accompanied by the view that the legacy of colonialism and neo-colonial interference by Western countries are the leading factors of conflict and that internal disputes cannot be resolved by solutions that are externally imposed. There is no evidence of China trying to impose its governance system to other countries, but Chinese policy makers and analysts often point to the post-Mao model of governance and development under one-party rule as more effective at achieving stability than Western-style democracy. There is a sense that, without force or coercion, China promotes and soft-sells its model (ICG, 2017). Indeed, the Chinese government ability to make decisions, mobilise resources and implement ambitious programmes finds many supporters across Africa, the Middle East and other regions. Another Chinese interviewee draws attention to the US and European countries being very experienced at top-level design for peace and transition processes in Africa, mainly by exporting liberal and democratic political systems. The outcomes, however, "are not always as positive as expected because the specific conditions of the African countries are not suitable for implementing Western systems" (Interview 1). Moreover, the engagement of the US and Europe in peace operations in Africa is seen as being "accompanied by the obvious intention of controlling and dominating the development agenda of African countries. However, as Africa now has more options for international cooperation, it is getting increasingly difficult for the US and Europe to implement their agendas" (ibid) Another interviewee shares similar views and emphasises that "instead of copy-pasting other systems into conflict-affected countries, China supports the efforts by peoples in post-conflict countries to determine their own future and destiny" (Interview 2).

China's emphasis on "local solutions" has been particularly evident in the approach to peace and security in Africa, where China repeatedly calls for "African solutions to African problems" (Permanent Mission of China [PMC], 2021), together with a predilection of regional organisations, e.g. the African Union, for the continental architecture of security management and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) for mediation in South Sudan. While there are often geo-political undertones in such statements and positions—implying that Western approaches should not be accepted—one interviewee emphasises that "in Africa and the Middle East, it is the regional and sub-regional organisations, or relevant countries, that request China's involvement" (Interview 3). This, however, does not mean that as its international role and approaches evolve, China will passively follow regional positions, in Africa or elsewhere, without trying to shape them. China's actions in Sudan and South Sudan, as elaborated below, offer vivid examples of China's evolving approach on peace and security.

- Diplomatic persuasion, rather than punishments. Having itself been a target of sanctions, China has a historic distaste for them, especially unilateral sanctions (*Global Times*, 2021) and other restrictive measures and punishments, which it equates to interference in other countries' domestic affairs. It instead favours diplomatic persuasion and compromise, or in the words of one Chinese scholar, "good offices, mediation and quiet diplomacy" (Interview 2). Taking the current conflict in Tigray in northern Ethiopia as an example, one Chinese expert points out that Russia, India and many developing countries share China's stance and oppose interference in the internal affairs of Ethiopia and the imposition of sanctions on Ethiopia. The expert argues that interference and sanctions cannot solve the conflict and do not contribute to building peace (Interview 1). According to this view, interference and sanctions imposed by the US and European countries represent hegemony and power which preserve their interests and oppose the self-determination of countries like Ethiopia (ibid). In different contexts, such as in Sudan, South Sudan, Myanmar and Afghanistan, China has leveraged its political and economic influence to set the table and bring parties together. Chinese scholars have pointed to Chinese diplomacy reflecting the values, traditions and practice of a Confucianism/moralistic value system that revolves around moderation, social harmony, respect for authority, humility and benevolence (Interviews 1 and 3).

It is worth pointing out, however, that China has started to initiate counter-sanctions programmes, enacting, in June 2021, the Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law (AFSL) (The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China [NPCPRC], 2021) to retaliate against foreign sanctions - particularly U.S. sanctions - and has sanctioned a number of officials, politicians and think tanks from countries including the U.S., the UK, Germany and Australia.

- The pursuit of multipolarity and a vision for transforming global governance. China is committed to pursuing a multi-polar world order. This is when countries "adhere to norms and principles of international relations based on the traditional Westphalian principles; oppose a post-modern system advocated by Western countries with the notion of "limited sovereignty"; oppose the resolution of dispute by interference and the use of force; and advocate the leading role of the UN in international peace and security" (The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China [NPCPRC], 2021). However, some Western analysts emphasise that as part of its "multipronged strategy toward global governance", China supports international institutions and agreements that are in line with its goals and norms (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021), such as the UN, the World Bank and the Glasgow Climate Pact on climate change. Nevertheless, when it is unable, or not allowed, to assume a more central role in global governance institutions—for example, within the IMF—or where China's position diverges from the norms of the current system - such as around human rights - it has shown a propensity to set up alternative institutions and models (ibid). The establishment of, amongst others, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), captures this dynamic.

China sees the United Nations as a pillar of international cooperation. In his statement at the general debate of the 76th session of the UNGA, President Xi stressed, "In the world, there is only one international system, i.e. the international system with the United Nations at its core. There is only one international order, i.e. the international order underpinned by international law. There is only one set of rules, i.e. the basic norms governing international relations underpinned by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter" (*Xinhua*, 2021). All the interviewees concur that the United Nations is, for China, the bulwark of global governance and multilateralism. For one interviewee, "the UN, despite its bloated bureaucracy and administrative inefficiency, is still the only legitimate multilateral mechanism for consultation and decision-making. In response to various regional conflicts in recent years, it has played an essential role in stabilising the situation, balancing the powers, and promoting negotiations among the parties concerned" (Interview 5). Another interviewee stresses that "countries should take good care of the UN family, refrain from exploiting the UN or abandoning it at one's will, and make sure that the UN plays an even more positive role in advancing humanity's noble cause of peace and development" (Interview 6). However, China appears to be increasingly trying to shape, or reshape, the response of the UN—demarcating certain types of activities as "inappropriate" for the UN in general, or the UNSC in particular. For example, in 2021, the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi advocated "three avoids" for the current situation in Myanmar, which included preventing violence by all parties, preventing foreign interference and preventing "inappropriate intervention by the United Nations Security Council, which would undermine Myanmar's sovereignty and further complicate the matters" (MFAPRC, 2021). While outspoken about the need to reform the UN system, China, like Russia, is much more cautious about reforms of the Security Council for fear of giving up its privileged position as a permanent member.

China has articulated a vision for transforming global governance, which is exemplified by its effort to construct a "community of common destiny for mankind" (人类命运共同体, *rénlèi mìngyùn gòngtóngtǐ*). The slogan, which was originally used by former President Hu Jintao in 2007 (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Kenya, 2021) and then frequently used by President Xi Jinping, has been described as the main goal of China's foreign policy (Zhang, 2018) and it was included in 2018 in the preamble of the amended Constitution of the People's Republic of China (Yang, 2018). A collection of discourses and writings by Xi Jinping on upholding and advancing the building of a community with a shared future for mankind published in 2018 (NPCPRC, 2019), decodes China's strategic intentions and its approach to five foreign policy dimensions: politics, security, development, culture, and the environment. The vision has four key principles. First, it is premised on mutual respect and stresses that countries differ in their traditional culture, political system and development priorities and paths. Differences in systems do not mean that ideologies are incompatible. Second, competitions between countries are not a zero-sum game, but should aim for complementing each other and developing a "win-win" scenario. Such competitions should be bound and regulated by certain rules. Third, it attaches importance to responsible engagement in regional security issues, as no country can achieve its own security in isolation from the security of other countries. Responsible engagement in regional security issues is the precondition for countries to secure their own security and create a good development environment. Finally, "harmony in diversity" should be the philosophy for development (Xi, 2018). The vision ultimately aims to establish a new type of international relations, with an increasing number of countries connected more strongly with China and supporting Chinese national interests.

China in action

The tensions between established non-interventionist policies and practices addressing conflict have been visible in China's engagement in South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, especially in those contexts where there are significant Chinese investments, and Chinese nationals and financial interests are directly affected by violent conflict.

Crisis diplomacy and mediation

Mediation diplomacy has become one the pillars of China's engagement in numerous countries affected by conflict, where China's use of mediation also helps it to promote its own economic, political, and security interests and to cultivate its image as a responsible global power, thus enhancing its international prestige and influence (Chaziza, 2018).

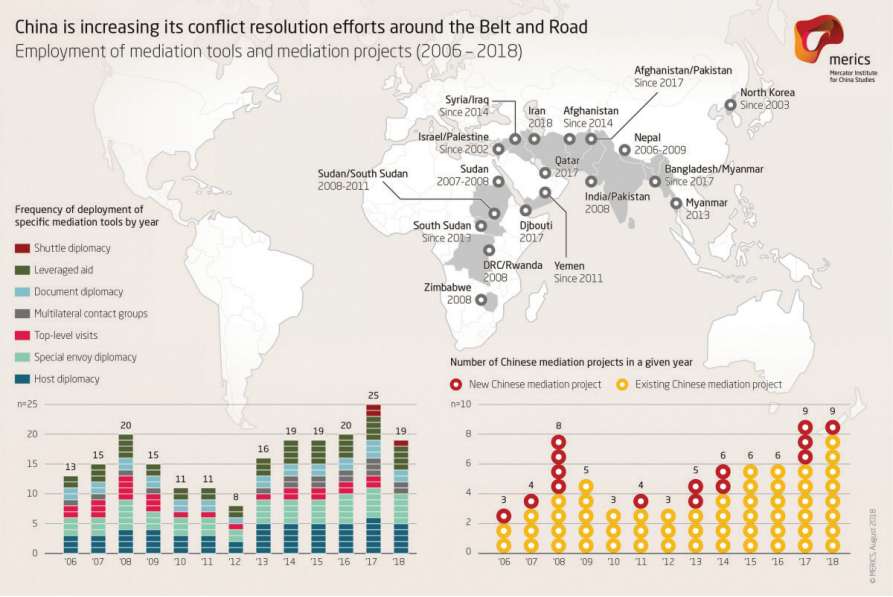
Over the past decade, China has been playing an increasingly proactive role in crisis diplomacy and conflict mediation activities, and has been relying increasingly on special representatives to facilitate talks and other mediation efforts aimed at deescalating conflicts or tensions in a number of countries, including Afghanistan, Iran, Myanmar and North Korea. As its mediation role grows, China has continued to frame its engagement in terms of non-interference, by presenting its own visions and roadmaps (MFAPRC, 2021, 2020) on resolving conflicts that encourage local and regional solutions. In the Middle East, this has included a five-point initiative on promoting peace and stability in the region, a three-point proposal for the implementation of the two-state solution to facilitate the settlement of the Palestinian question and a four-point proposal for the settlement of the Syrian issue. This limiting of the stated objectives of the mediation itself and consulting relevant government authorities has been termed "negotiated intervention" (Interview 10). As one analyst points out, "the logic is that if the host government is receptive and welcoming [to the mediation] it no longer constitutes interference" '(Interview 8). Thus allowing China to significantly shift its policies without appearing to abandon its fundamental principles. China also engages in what has been described "incentivized mediation" (Hirono, 2019), in which Beijing uses its economic power to "provide incentives or leverage for warring factions to come to the negotiating table, but which also lets the warring factions formulate their own roadmap to peace talks" (ibid). It has been noted how such mediation efforts have become more visible with the Chinese government publicizing "its efforts in preventing, managing, and resolving conflicts through official government statements and media coverage" (Paczynska, 2021).

In Sudan and South Sudan—where China has large investments in the oil industry—violence escalated and threatened both Chinese investments and nationals working in these countries, and China played an important role in mediating conflicts (Paczyńska, 2021; Interviews 3, 4 and 5; ICG, 2017). In 2007, in response to international criticism and calls to boycott the Beijing Olympic Games, China experimented with deeper involvement in a conflict context, eventually playing a central role in persuading the government in Khartoum to accept a joint United Nations–African Union (UN–AU) peacekeeping force in Darfur (Sultan, H.E.M. & Sun, D., 2020; Paczyńska, 2021). The experience gained in Sudan paved the way for China's future engagement in mediation in South Sudan, where China is actively involved in the ongoing IGAD-led peace process, trying to contribute to the country's domestic reconciliation process. When South Sudan relapsed into civil war in 2014, China secured the inclusion of the protection of oil workers within the mandate of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and sent in peacekeeping troops to protect the assets and personnel of the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), which has significant shares in the main oil operation consortium in South Sudan (Zhang, 2018).

In the Middle East, where it "carries no religious, political, historical and colonial baggage" (Chaziza, 2018), China—alongside the ever-growing economic ties—is also intensifying its diplomatic engagement. Its good relations with all major states in the region, including Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, have allowed China to position itself as a potential regional peace-broker. In October 2020, China expressed its willingness to support the Gulf countries in establishing a multilateral dialogue platform to exchange their security concerns and to work towards a political settlement of regional issues (CGTN, 2020). In March 2021, the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited six Middle East countries (Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Oman), pledging China's "contribution to peace and development in the Middle East through sincere cooperation" (CGTN, 2021). He announced a new five-point initiative to achieve security and stability in the Middle East, urging regional countries to: respect one another; work toward regional denuclearization and the return of the US and Iran to the nuclear agreement; accelerate regional development cooperation; foster Gulf collective security; and maintain equality and justice (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, 2021). In January 2022, the Foreign Ministers of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Iran and Turkey, and the Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council visited China and held separate talks with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. China has also engaged in dialogue on the Iranian nuclear issue and has attempted mediation of the Israeli-Palestine conflict (*South China Morning Post*, 2021; The *Times of Israel*, 2021).

However, since Beijing tries to mediate these conflicts without becoming embroiled militarily, its approach, as one observer noted, "seems to be more focused on solutions that can contain tensions and bring about negative peace rather than long-term, futuristic, and sustainable solutions" (Balasubramanian, 2020). At the same time, these good relationships and mediation diplomacy have also meant that Middle East countries have supported China on issues related to Taiwan, and have refrained from criticizing China's repression of the political opposition in Hong Kong and its Uyghur population in Xinjiang.

In Asia, China has also appointed special envoys and has engaged at different levels in Afghanistan and Myanmar. See the section below on "Practices of peacemaking in China's periphery".



China's conflict resolution efforts around the BRI © MERICS

The war in Ukraine has prompted calls for China to mediate in the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine. While it remains to be seen whether China will be willing to use its influence to help find a diplomatic solution to the conflict, China's crisis diplomacy and mediation history offer precedents and options for a potential mediation role in Ukraine (Yang, 2022).

Infrastructure development

Infrastructure development is a key priority for Chinese engagement overseas. Since its official launch in 2013 the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the world's most ambitious infrastructure initiative has evolved into a global platform at the heart of China's international development co-operation. Currently spanning numerous countries across Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe, many BRI-related investments are in fragile and conflict-prone environments with large tracts of the BRI's "corridors" passing through areas where political and ethnic tensions have often led to armed conflicts and violence (Abb et al, 2021). In such contexts, tensions and disputes over access to resources and power that have often existed for a long time often hinder peace and prosperity prospects. China recognises a peaceful and stable environment as the prerequisite for the implementation of the BRI and has been advocating, within the framework of BRI, for conflict resolution through political means and mediation, and for the creation of a favourable environment for economic and human development (Swaine, Mariani & Jones, 2021). Official Chinese statements related to the BRI regularly assert the benign "win-win" nature of the initiative and the inevitability of peace and improved security, because of increased connectivity and economic development along the BRI. While the incentive for such investment in physical infrastructure is not necessarily to make or build peace, BRI investments can have a peacebuilding potential, especially in areas where the lack of infrastructure marginalises communities and inhibits a state presence and access to services and employment. However, numerous factors can drive conflict and BRI projects may inadvertently fuel more divisions, tensions and even conflict in fragile societies. Therefore, there have been calls by international NGOs to institutionalise meaningful conflict and peacebuilding analysis within the framework for delivering BRI projects, alongside the need to support people and communities when engaging with Chinese BRI investors on matters of peace and security.

International development cooperation

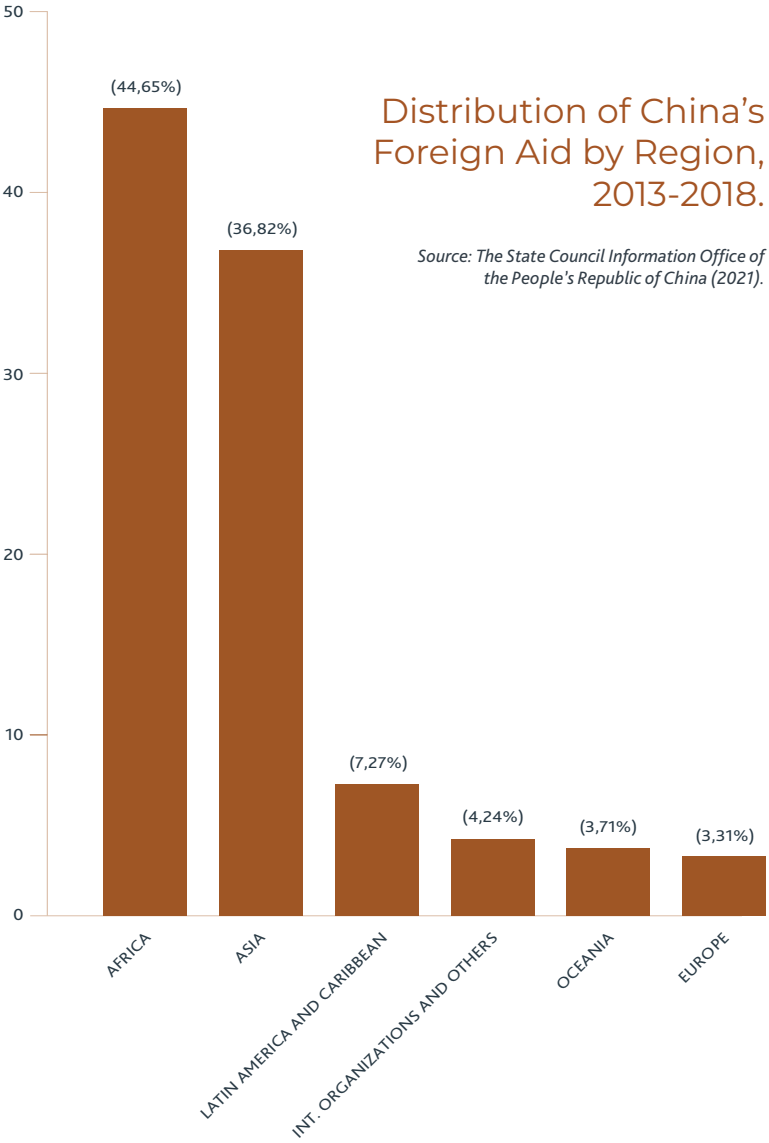
As the largest developing country in the world, China classifies itself as a South-South cooperation development partner or provider, rather than a "donor". In contrast to the normative conditions-based liberal development aid that promotes good governance and human rights, Chinese officials and policy experts emphasise that China's favours pragmatic development cooperation, "win-wins", mutual benefits, and self-reliance (Interview 8). Over the past 10 years, China's importance as a global development actor has grown. This growth has taken the form of grants, interest-free loans and concessional loans. It has been estimated that between 2013 and 2018, China spent an annual average of around US$7.0 billion on foreign assistance, which is a growth of almost fifty percent compared to the 2010-2012 period (SCPRC, 2021). China's official development assistance (ODA) in 2019 was estimated at US$5.9 billion, which made China the sixth largest provider of ODA (Kitano & Miyabayash, 2020). At the UN Sustainable Development Summit in September 2015, President Xi announced the establishment of a new US$2 billion South-South cooperation assistance fund—due to increase to $12 billion by 2030 (MFAPRC, 2015) - to help developing countries to meet the sustainable development goals (SDGs). The regional spread of Chinese aid—in particular, the fact that Africa currently accounts for forty-five percent of China's foreign assistance whereas only thirty-seven percent goes to Asia – contrasts with the practices of countries like India and Japan, whose aid assistance is primarily concentrated in Asia and is testimony to China's "global" rather than "regional" aid outlook.

China has overhauled key aspects of its development aid approach to cultivate the expertise necessary to better target development assistance and to evaluate the impact of its interventions. There have been two key milestones in China's intent to become a leading development partner. In 2018, China created a new aid agency called the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), with a mandate "to formulate strategic guidelines, plans and policies for foreign aid, coordinate and offer advice on major foreign aid issues, advance the country's reforms in matters involving foreign aid, and identify major programs and supervise and evaluate their implementation" (China International Development Cooperation Agency [CIDCA], 2021)". In 2021, China published a third White Paper on development aid entitled "China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era". The paper calls for a new phase in Chinese development assistance focused on securing China's desire to act as "a builder of world peace, a contributor to global prosperity and a defender of international order" (SCPRC, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a renewed focus to China as a global development actor. China has intensified its efforts to position itself as a responsible global power, providing assistance through multilateral and bilateral channels to help fight the pandemic and distribute medical supplies, medical teams, and vaccines. During the first months of the pandemic, China's comparatively effective response to the COVID crisis, together with the increasing insularity of US policy, created opportunities for China to increase its international cooperation (Johnson & Zühr, 2021). When former US President Donald Trump announced the US's withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO) in May of 2020, China emphasised the importance of multilateralism and pledged an additional US$30 million to the WHO to support the global fight against COVID-19 (Reuters, 2020). At the UN, Chinese representatives linked the fight against the pandemic to long-term peace-building approaches that should be "development-focused and socially inclusive" and emphasized the need for solidarity, collaboration, and multilateralism (United Nations, 2020). The extraordinary China-Africa Summit of Solidarity in the Face of COVID-19, held in June 2020, also underscored the link between the ongoing public health crisis and peace (MFAPRC, 2020). In December 2021, during a speech on "China's foreign aid against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic", Luo Zhaohui, Chairman of CIDCA, lauded China's "largest global emergency humanitarian assistance since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC)" (CIDCA, 2021). He added that "China's foreign aid in 2021 mainly focused on international anti-pandemic cooperation" (ibid) and highlighted that China had "provided over 2 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines to more than 120 countries and international organizations, making it the top vaccine donator around the world" (ibid).

Distribution of China's Foreign Aid by Region, 2013-2018.

Source: The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (2021).

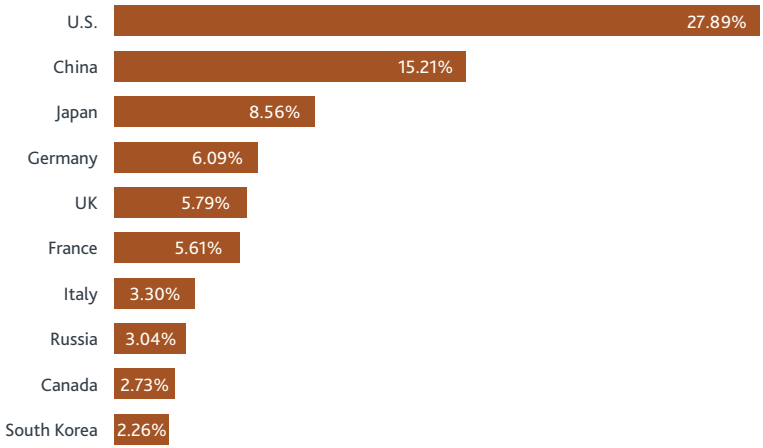


UN peace operations

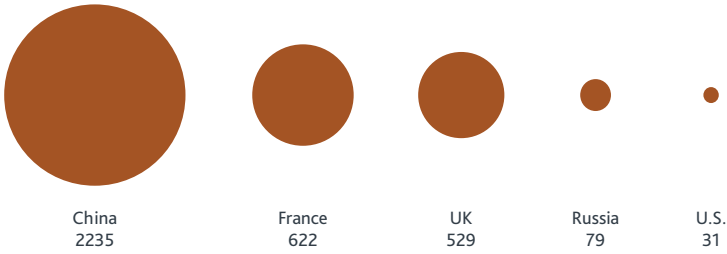
Over the past three decades, China's engagement in UN peace operations has drastically evolved (Zürcher, 2019; MNDPRC, 2019; Mariani, 2016), becoming a notable part of China's engagement in conflict and post-conflict settings. China's quest to protect its economic interests and modernise and train its military forces, as well as an interest in a more prominent role in providing international public security goods, have resulted in greater engagement in UN peace operations. China is the second largest financial contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget and the world's ninth leading contributor (United Nations, 2021) of uniformed peacekeeping personnel. It provides the most troops to UN peacekeeping missions of all permanent members of the UNSC. As of 30 November 2021, there were 2,253 Chinese military and police personnel deployed to UN peacekeeping missions. Chinese peacekeepers are deployed to some of the UN's most dangerous operations, including the four largest UN operations in Africa in the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Darfur, and Mali. In 2015, President Xi expanded the commitment of China to promoting global peace and security by pledging US$1 billion to UN programmes supporting initiatives in this area and promising to build a UN peacekeeping standby force of 8,000 troops (MFAPRC, 2015). China has also increasingly engaged with debates at the UN headquarters regarding peacekeeping policy. Here, despite its concerns with what it views as overly interventionist aspects of peacekeeping missions, China has nonetheless highlighted its commitment to multidimensional peacekeeping operations, signing onto UNSC mandates that include "expansive language on the responsibility of UN forces to protect civilians, advance human rights, and relate priorities" (Gowan, 2020).

China's contributions to UN peace operations.

Financial contributions to UN peacekeeping budget.



Number of peacekeepers among P5.



Source: United Nations (2021).

Engagement with regional bodies

Over the past 20 years, China has expanded its security and multilateral peace-building cooperation in Africa, engaging closely with regional bodies, such as the AU, which it has particularly commended for its significant role "in safeguarding peace and stability in the region and promoting African solidarity and development" (MFAPRC, 2006). China's commitment to the AU is demonstrated by the $100 million-worth of free military aid provided, which Beijing pledged in 2015 for building the African Standby Force and the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crisis (General Assembly of the United Nations [GAUN], 2015). At the same time, the integration of peace into China's policy on Africa has been visible within the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), a platform designed to build official dialogue and partnership between China and African states. Peace and security cooperation is one of the core pillars of FOCAC dialogue and commitments. At the fifth Ministerial Conference of FOCAC held in Beijing in July 2012, China and Africa launched the "Initiative on China-Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security" (ICACPPS) (Alden & Zheng, 2019). At the FOCAC Johannesburg Summit held in December 2015, China and Africa pledged to implement the ICACPPS and "to support the building of the collective security mechanism in Africa, and jointly manage non-traditional security issues and global challenges" (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation [FOCAC], 2015). At the 2018 FOCAC summit in Beijing, specific commitments were included in the 2019-2021 FOCAC action plan - including fifty security assistance programs to advance China-Africa cooperation under the BRI and a China-Africa peace and security fund to boost China-Africa cooperation on peace, security, peacekeeping, and law and order (FOCAC, 2018). In 2021, at the eighth Ministerial Conference of FOCAC in Dakar, China and Africa continued to focus on building the capacity of African countries to independently maintain regional security and fight terrorism. They also agreed to conduct joint exercises and on-site training between Chinese and African peacekeeping troops and to cooperate on small arms and light weapons control (FOCAC, 2021).

Practices of peacemaking and peacebuilding in China's periphery

Fostering a more stable and secure neighbourhood is a critical issue for the Chinese Government. China's internal security outlook, the concern that instability in neighbouring countries may spill over into its territory—in particular the North-Western region of Xinjiang and the Yunnan province—as well as the concern that separatist groups may leverage the border in ways that China sees threatening, shape China's practices in its immediate neighbourhood. Through its development peace strategy, China seeks to promote economic development in neighbouring countries, with the rationale being that this will reduce the prospects of unrest in countries neighbouring China and, in turn, reduce the threat to China's own stability and territorial integrity.

Several interviewees emphasise that geographic proximity is an important factor in influencing China's engagement in conflict and post-conflict environments (Interviews 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 10). One of them points out that, "Conflict or peace in China's surrounding areas, such as the situation on the Korean Peninsula and in Myanmar, are of great concern to China. In comparison, conflicts in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America are generally given lower priority in Chinese diplomacy" (Interview 1). Other interviewees share a similar view and argue that China's approaches to conflict and instability in its periphery differ from its approaches to conflict in more distant regions, for example in Africa (Interviews 3, 4, 5, 9 and 10).

Such views are also shared by Western analysts who elaborate on China's proactive peace role in its periphery. One view is that China does not want Western states to take the lead in shaping the outcome of a conflict in its neighbourhood. It is therefore increasingly trying to insert itself into peace processes, taking a mediation role, and even blocking other stakeholders from being at the negotiating table, or playing a role in conflict management (Tower, 2022). In its neighbourhood, China does not necessarily want the UN Security Council's involvement. It looks instead for the leading role to be played by regional organisations or associations where it maintains a high level of influence, so that it has more control over the process, "especially avoiding that a large number of western stakeholders end up in its periphery and have a high level of influence in countries where China has strong interests at stake, be they economic, geopolitical or geostrategic" (ibid).

Afghanistan

Maintaining regional stability, ensuring the safety of its borders, and preventing a spill-over effect from the Taliban's success to extremist groups across Central Asia (for example the East Turkestan Islamic Movement), are major concerns for China. It is no wonder, then, that Afghanistan is the latest test ground for China's efforts to mediate in conflicts. China's peacemaking efforts in Afghanistan date back to late 2014, when Taliban leaders reportedly visited China for talks with Afghan officials, which were brokered by China (Tiezzi, 2015). It was the start of a series of rounds of quiet diplomacy to encourage the Afghan national government and the Taliban to initiate peace talks. In 2015, China joined the Quadrilateral Coordination Group and the Moscow Format and hosted negotiations between the Taliban and Afghan officials in Xinjiang's capital, Urumqi. China's diplomatic engagement increased over the following years. In 2017, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi personally engaged in shuttle diplomacy between Pakistan and Afghanistan and in December 2017, China became the host of the first China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). As talks got underway between the United States and the Taliban in 2019, China, like Russia, pursued its own parallel track. China publicly supported a peace deal between the United States and the Taliban in February 2020, while simultaneously preparing to restart its own mediation approach should the U.S. negotiations falter. On 28 July 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with a top-level Taliban delegation in Tianjin. At the meeting, he labelled the Taliban "an important military and political force" that "is expected to play an important role in the country's peace, reconciliation and reconstruction process" (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Poland [EPRCRP], 2021).

When the Taliban eventually swept to power in August 2021, China called upon the international community to provide assistance without conditions, unfreeze assets, and "remove obstacles to reconstruction." In a phone call on 29 August 2021 with the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Foreign Minister Wang called for the international community to engage with the Taliban and "positively guide" them, provide economic and humanitarian aid, and help maintain social stability in Afghanistan. Along with Pakistan, China was also one of the first countries to offer foreign aid to the new Taliban-led government, pledging US$31 million worth of grain, winter supplies, vaccines, and medicine (*BBC*, 2021) and sending winter supplies to the country facing a humanitarian crisis (*South China Morning Post*, 2021).

However, China has yet to officially recognise Afghanistan's new leadership. China's cautious approach may signify that "Beijing does not necessarily view recent developments in Afghanistan as a geostrategic and economic windfall "(Calabrese, 2021)". And reflects instead "the calculation that diplomatic and economic incentives might induce the Taliban to adopt positions that align closely with Chinese interests" (ibid).

Myanmar

China has a long history of economic, political and cultural influence in Myanmar. For 40 years, it has been Myanmar's main international investor, as well as its most important ally in matters of defence and diplomacy. China has invested billions of dollars in Myanmar in hydropower, coal power, mining, oil and gas pipeline construction, banana and rubber plantations, industrial parks and more. However, due to the fragmented political landscape of Myanmar, numerous projects operate in areas affected by conflict, meaning that in many parts of Myanmar Chinese businesses are inextricably tied to the local conflict economy. This has created a role for China to act as a peace and security actor.

As a convener and peace broker, China has engaged in conflict management efforts in Myanmar over the past decade, trying to find a balance from 2015 to 2020 between its approach to ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and the central government authorities (Li, 2020) and facilitating talks between the Government of Myanmar and rebel groups, such as the Kachin Independence Organisation (Yun, 2013). Given its close relationships to both military and civilian government authorities and to certain EAOs, especially those in the north of the country, China has been "a natural candidate to build and provide guarantees to a peace deal" (Li, 2020). An array of mediation activities shows China's active engagement in Myanmar since 2010. In no other country has China been so directly involved for such a long time in an internal peace process. However, such engagement has been criticised for being dictated by strategic and economic interests that have overlooked local needs, bolstered elite control of the state, and discounted the political context of peace processes (Adhikari, 2021).

Chinese support and involvement remain critical to the long-term chances of mitigating the violence associated with Myanmar's subnational conflicts and, more recently, the turmoil caused by the military coup that in February 2021 ousted a civilian government. One Chinese interviewee stated that after the military coup, China took a series of measures, including keeping communication channels open with both sides, adopting ASEAN's official stance, providing vaccinations and conducting livelihood projects (Interview 4). According to one Western analyst, both the Yunnan provincial government and Beijing have been deeply engaged in responding to the crisis in Myanmar (Tower, 2022). This is part of a two-pronged approach whereby China is highly engaged both in working with northern EAOs—trying to either provide support to those EAOs to meet certain Chinese objectives—or alternatively working with the military junta by providing them with assistance that may stabilise the situation while deflecting efforts by other members of the international community to take stronger steps that might speed up the erosion and collapse of the military regime (ibid). Through formal and informal channels—especially the shuttle diplomacy of China's Special envoy Sun Guoxiang—China is providing strategic guidance to the military on how to implement a Five-Point Road Map towards a return to a so-called "managed democracy" which would be choreographed by the military. China publicly voices support for the roadmap and a formal peace process, but also endorses the five points of consensus reached at a special ASEAN Leaders' Summit that was convened in April 2021 to address the crisis in Myanmar. At the same time, China is providing significant COVID aid to EAOs while also putting pressure on EAOs to signal an interest in a ceasefire. Given that the economic space is rapidly shifting, Chinese business actors are looking to see how they can gain new economic advantages and benefits from the ruling junta, particularly concessions, be they in minerals, other natural resources, or trade. On the whole - according to one Western analyst - China is strengthening the junta and powerful EAOs and is putting itself, at least in the long term, in a position where if those parties and the junta are successful in pushing out the opposition, China will be well placed to capitalise on the overall situation, because it will have the junta isolated from the international community and China will be the only partner it could turn to for its economic development in the future. If the dominance of the junta does not materialise, then the EAOs, which are close allies of China, will be much more powerful in the North. "Either way China will have a party that it will be able to work with in the future to advance its interests" (ibid).

Conclusions

China and Western liberal democracies have quite different political values, norms and worldviews that underpin their foreign policy actions—including in conflict and post-conflict environments—and make ideological confrontations over governance, democracy and human rights particularly conspicuous. As China propagates a new vision for transforming global governance, there is also a growing literature showing China's efforts to strengthen its own discourse power and make the world more accommodating to its political model.

Chinese literature, official policy papers and formal statements all point to a Chinese approach towards peace that differs significantly from the one championed by Western countries. The key differences between the two approaches are those emanating from China's home-grown understanding of peace through its own developmental peace model, as well as the concepts of non-interference and interference theory. Rather than focusing on liberal political reforms and institutional inclusiveness, China's approach stresses creating stability through state capacity building and providing economic opportunities. Because of its own experiences with colonialism and violent conflict, China's official rhetoric on foreign affairs favours the traditional principles of respect of national sovereignty and "non-interference" in other countries. It draws a line at regime change or unilateral military interventions, and it has a historic distaste for sanctions and inflicting punishments. China's notions of stability, consolidation of state authority, territorial integrity and non-interference vs. pluralist democracy is on par with the Russian "mirotvorchestvo" concept of peace creation and state building. The autocratic forms of government and geopolitical competition with the West, especially with the United States of America, accentuate the similarities between the Chinese and Russian peace models and make them look like allies on the world stage. However, Russia and China are economically unequal, and, unlike China, Russia cannot draw from the strengths of its economy to pursue a development-focused governance model, a key and unique feature of Chinese peacebuilding. Moreover, in China's case, global economic expansionism has direct implications for the interaction between the official discourses around state sovereignty and non-interference and the actual practices on the ground.

The more complex and multifaceted China's international relations are, the more under strain the practical application of the traditional principles appears in practice. In its efforts to reconcile traditional foreign policy with its global economic expansionism, China has already proved willing to pursue interventionist policies in cases where civil conflicts threaten regional security and stability, or where economic and security interests are at stake. In such cases, when local authorities and/or the UN and regional organisations have granted their approval, China has sought a mediation role as a legitimate form of intervention in the politics of other states without abandoning its traditional principles. In Sudan, South Sudan, Libya, Myanmar and, more recently, in Afghanistan, China has positioned itself as a peacemaker. It has made commitments with African states and multilateral institutions, such as the African Union, that focus on addressing issues of peace and security and it is playing an increasingly important role in UN peace operations. China's crisis diplomacy and mediation history offer precedents and options for a potential mediation role in the ongoing military conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

There is a view in the Chinese policy discourse that the "developmental peace" model will inevitably influence the international order system, however rather than being an alternative to the liberal peace, it is more supplementary. Some scholars see the potential of positive competition between these two models in peacebuilding (He, 2017). However, in both discursive and behavioural contestation, China the "norm maker" challenges the validity and applicability of liberal peacemaking and peacebuilding conceptions in so far as it seeks to shape and weaken global norms around human rights and democracy promotion, pushing instead for more economic and development, and stability initiatives over initiatives meeting good governance, rule of law, democracy, or respect for political and social rights. In fact, the terminology itself is highly contested because the norms and approaches that fall under the liberal peacemaking and peacebuilding toolkit imply social change and conflict transformation that, within the Chinese social science space, are very contentious because they are seen as synonymous with direct interference and imposing western values. While its global engagement is bound to a development and economic core, under the "community of common destiny" slogan, China has articulated a vision for transforming global governance and making the international environment more amenable to its governance model, its national interests and its emergence as a global power. It also has many assets that it can deploy around the world, including in fragile and/or conflict-affected states, to execute its vision.

China's economic standing on the world stage and its importance as a global development actor translate into political influence. When China steps in, it brings significant leverage to mediation, or to any other peace efforts. Its "development first" model finds numerous adherents among non-Western democracies, including Brazil, India, Indonesia, Japan, South Africa and South Korea, and that model resonates well with the economic and political aspirations of a large majority of developing countries. In specific contexts, for example across Africa, there are historical affinities and China can tap into dissatisfaction with Western interventionism. Skilfully tailored humanitarian assistance/vaccine diplomacy has helped to improve China's image. So has its increased willingness and capacity to engage in UN peace operations.

However, translating its vision into practice and supplanting the liberal model also faces challenges that will inevitably push China to adopt an incremental approach to implementing its strategies. Despite China appearing as a coherent monolithic bloc, a number of often-disparate actors (national and provincial authorities, state-owned companies and a myriad of private entrepreneurs, Communist Party and government bodies) engage at different levels in conflict and post-conflict societies and are divided at times by competing interests. China is a relatively new global peace and security actor. The Chinese Foreign Ministry has limited resources, expertise, freedom, time or authority and lacks the network of field-based NGOs that Western countries can work with to complement their diplomats' knowledge. Specific expertise on, for example, Africa and the Middle East, is underdeveloped, while conflict management is still a nascent discipline. Furthermore, as mentioned by one interviewee, there is also limited knowledge of local public opinion on China's engagement and of the impact of Chinese engagement on local communities (Interview 3). Lastly, China, the first country to impose draconic restrictions to combat the COVID pandemic is likely to be one of the last to ease them. While numerous countries are transitioning to a post-COVID environment, China has cut itself off from the rest of the world and faces the hard challenge of when and how to reopen, with the authorities currently showing little inclination to alter their zero-COVID approach. Despite an active vaccine diplomacy, the COVID pandemic and China's self-imposed isolation have impacted negatively on international relations and China's role within them, slowing down international exchanges and the implementation of BRI projects, and spoiling China's global image.

Despite temporary setbacks, China remains the main driver of global growth and with a changing world order, China will likely become more involved in countries where peace is fragile. For China, this will bring new responsibilities and policy choices, with an increased understanding of the need to secure sustainable peace and seek common ground for cooperation with the West, rather than competition, that will help to better safeguard its own interests. For the West, China's role in redefining the international approach to peacemaking and peacebuilding is an inevitability that also brings a strategic opportunity to engage with China as it continues to navigate through policy development and adaptation.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provides a potential confluence of interests. China is investing a great deal in the BRI, which has a significant transformative potential for conflict environments where Western countries are also engaged. For China, the business viability of the BRI is linked to greater peace and stability in the countries it passes through. BRI projects enable the provision of fundamental public services, the deployment of state power to remote areas and increased economic activity. While these factors are likely to contribute to the reduction of violence, infrastructure may also tilt the economic and political balance of power between affected groups (or between civil society and the state) and could exacerbate conflicts through an uneven distribution of costs and benefits. Moreover, the construction of BRI projects in conflict environments has often involved militarized protection measures, with adverse effects for the well-being and rights of local groups.

Dedicated research on the peace implications of the BRI is limited as of this writing. Studying how this initiative is transforming conflict environments, either positively or negatively, is crucial to better understanding how Chinese agency affects peace and conflict dynamics and relates to the efforts of other international actors engaged in the affected countries, as well as deriving practical suggestions for better coordination between actors and mitigating the adverse effects of the initiative. A systematic, empirical research effort focused on the most prominent global infrastructure initiative would significantly contribute to our understanding in this field and yield highly relevant practical insights on the relationship between infrastructure development and conflict risks, while advising Chinese, Western and local actors on the interplay between their activities and showing how to achieve a better coordination between them.

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