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The Role of Domestic Actors in China's International Conflict Management

Bernardo Mariani, Monalisa Adhikari and Yiqi Zhou

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Abstract

China's practices of addressing violent conflicts and security challenges have evolved to become more flexible, pragmatically driven, and varied across multilateral and regional contexts. Much of the exisiting scholarship has focused on China as a unitary actor. This paper moves beyond such a simplification, and examines the role of often overlooked actors operating outside the official foreign policy establishment and their impact in shaping China's engagement in international conflict management. It argues that, with China's rise, and the accompanying pluralisation of Chinese foreign policy making and practice, a range of actors — including think tanks, provincial authorities and state-owned enterprises (often with competing interests and portfolios) — inform and shape China's peace and security engagement. The paper supports this argument by examining how these three groups of actors participate in and affect China's conflict management in the different context in which they operate. Finally, the report outlines the implications of these findings for China's international interlocutors and partners.

Key Findings

- Despite China's party-centred political system, various domestic sub-state actors — including think tanks, provincial governments and state-owned enterprises — are increasingly shaping China's engagement in conflict and post-conflict societies. This shift is engendered by the wider phenomenon of pluralisation of Chinese foreign policy – where multiple domestic entities are undertaking different aspects of policy making and implementation, often competing with one another. The interests of these domestic actors, and their ability to influence China's foreign policy, are increasingly shaping the norms and practices of China's international conflict management.

- Chinese think tanks play a key role in articulating the Chinese normative framework in conflict management. 'Developmental peace' as a concept is increasingly articulated by Chinese officials at the UN and beyond to define China's unique conflict management or peacebuilding paradigm. The normative framework of developmental peace was shaped by influential researchers working within Chinese think tanks, and later integrated into the official state narratives.

- Chinese provinces can affect the formulation and implementation of China's economic, diplomatic and security engagement, especially in China's neighbourhood, where they impact peace and conflict dynamics – both directly and indirectly. The provincial authorities of the Chinese province of Yunnan have leveraged the province's proximity to Myanmar, as well as Beijing's permission to engage with ethnic minority groups living along the China-Myanmar border, to set the table for peace talks between Myanmar and ethnic rebels and to provide venues and security guarantees to participants in peace talks.

- State-owned enterprises (SOEs), including the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), play key roles in how China engages with resource-rich conflict areas. In such environments, they face high levels of risk and seek stability. In South Sudan, CNPC has carried out emergency responses and other actions to secure assets and personnel that have impacted on China's conflict management engagement in the country.

Recommendations

- Western analysts and policy makers need to acknowledge that China is not a unitary actor in conflict settings. A variety of domestic actors inform and shape China's peace and security engagement.

- Collaborations with Chinese scholars and think tanks, especially those that help to shape China's international conflict management engagement, are a fruitful way to better understand China's decision-making and behaviour in international conflict management. Collaborative research projects focusing on China's engagement in conflict and post-conflict societies should be pursued and enhanced further in the future.

- Engagement with Chinese provincial authorities can provide pertinent pathways to understanding how the policy, practice, and impact of China's engagement shapes peace and conflict dynamics in conflict-affected states in China's periphery from Myanmar to Afghanistan.

- Dialogue and cooperation with companies like CNPC and other SOEs can help institutionalise conflict-sensitive business practice (CSBP), bring company representatives, local authorities and communities together, encourage companies to dedicate resources to reduce conflict and enable peace, and adopt and implement transparency and accountability mechanisms.

Introduction

In the last two decades, China has emerged as a global peace and security actor. It has increasingly engaged in crisis diplomacy, conflict mediation, peace operations and post-conflict reconstruction (Huotari et al., 2017). Through shuttle diplomacy, peacekeeping, and funding development projects, China has been involved in conflict management and post-conflict reconstruction across many countries in Africa and Asia. Such increased engagement in conflict-affected states (CAS) has tested China's strict adherence to the norms of sovereignty and non-intervention (Cui, 2012; Cui, 2020), engendering varied, uneven, and contradictory practices on the global peace and security agenda (Hirono et al., 2019; Peter and Rice, 2022).

Examples of these seemingly contradictory practices can be found in China's engagement in its near-abroad. This has become more intrusive and interventionist in terms of its ability to commit more diplomatic and financial resources (Mariani, 2022), while also continuing to champion principles of non-intervention at the UN level and in areas outside of this region (Yuan and Song, 2015). Likewise, despite a more flexible interpretation of 'sovereignty' elsewhere, China has argued for a more traditional understanding of sovereignty within its neighbourhood, favouring an interpretation that focuses on non-intervention by the international community (Fung, 2021).

China's regional and global engagement in conflict mangement has been attributed to various external factors. These include seeking recognition of its increased international status (Fung, 2019), interest in aligning aspects of global governance with its own visions and interests (Hirono et al., 2019), a dissatisfaction with aspects of the normative liberal regime (Jütersonke et al., 2021; Yuan, 2022), the protection of Chinese nationals abroad (Wu and Taylor, 2011) and the quest for energy security (Jakobson, 2008).

Much progress has been made to better understand the external and geopolitical factors that shape the international behaviour of China and the role of subnational actors as sources of Chinese foreign policy making (Hameiri et al., 2019; Jakobson and Knox, 2010; Lai, 2010; Zhu, 2008; Wong, 2018). However, dedicated research on the impact of Chinese domestic actors in shaping and implementing China's international conflict-management engagement is limited at the time of writing. This paper attempts to address this gap by unpacking how a set of domestic actors account for China's engagement in conflict management.

These domestic actors often operate on the margins of traditional decision-making authorities — such as the Communist Party of China, the People's Liberation Army and the State Council — although some of them are part of the state apparatus. Provincial government institutions, in particular, are key elements of China's state organisational structure.

This article consciously refers to Chinese international conflict management rather than Chinese 'peacebuilding'. This is based on the understanding that China's articulations and concepts of peace differ fundamentally from those of Western countries. While peacemaking and peacebuilding are recurrent terminologies for peace practices in the phraseology of the liberal peace model, the concepts of peacemaking and peacebuilding are not fully accepted in China at the official level and are rarely mentioned by Chinese government officials (Mariani, 2022). Moreover, barely any Chinese civil society actors – be they scholars or think tank experts – refer to themselves as peace practitioners. Chinese officials and scholars instead highlight China's developmentalist path to peace (Zhang, 2022; Li, 2022; The State Council, 2021, 2019, 2011; MFAPRC, 2022; Yuan, 2020), which is premised on the idea that security needs economic development and vice-versa.

The research in this paper is based on a discursive analysis of influential academic and official Chinese- and English-language publications, including peer-reviewed articles, policy documents, an analysis of observations in Chinese and Western media and three semi-structured interviews with one Western analyst, one Chinese scholar and one South Sudanese NGO expert. To stimulate free and candid discussions, and to protect confidentiality, and in line with the approved ethics protocols of the project, the names of three interviewees and their institutions have been withheld.

After looking into the pluralisation and evolution of China's foreign policy, the paper proceeds by documenting: i) the role of scholars and think tanks in shaping the discursive framework of China's global peace and security agenda; ii) the role of the provincial government of Yunnan in shaping China's conflict management in Myanmar; and iii) the role of SOEs, in particular the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), in influencing China's peace and security engagement in Sudan and South Sudan.

The paper was researched and written before the recent war in Sudan that started in April, with clashes between different military factions killing hundreds of people. With the worsening security situation, China has called for dialogue between warring factions, but its priority has been the evacuation of over 1,300 Chinese nationals. Concerns over investment risks and protection of Chinese nationals in Sudan reinforces the argument we seek to make in this report regarding the pertinence of domestic actors in China's international conflict management.

The Pluralisation and Evolution of China's Foreign Security Policy

Despite being ruled by one party that dominates state and society, China is not a monolith. The making and implementation of its foreign policies continue to evolve, and do not belong entirely to any single actor. The Communist Party of China, the People's Liberation Army, government ministries and provincial governments, amongst other actors, are all prominent in the elaboration and implementation of China's foreign security policies, despite their divergent interests.

The evolution of Chinese foreign and security policy, and the contours of China's peace and security engagement, have received substantial scholarly attention. Scholars have looked into China's preferences and engagement in peacekeeping, mediation, multilateral diplomacy at the UN, and peacebuilding to draw out inferences concerning China's peace and security related engagement (Chaziza, 2018; Fung, 2019; Hirono et al., 2019; Large, 2008). There is consensus that China's policies are evolving, based on a flexible interpretation of the sovereignty norm, and pragmatic calculations of motivations and interests that vary depending on the context. Such a pragmatic adaptation, which has been discursively framed as "creative involvement" (Wang, 2011) and "responsible protection" (Ruan, 2012; Garwood-Gowers, 2016), is attributed to multiple factors, including China's newfound self-identity as a "responsible power" (Boon, 2018), growing security and strategic interests, and concerns about American unipolarity.

Various scholars have also elaborated on domestic sources of Chinese foreign policy, pointing to the phenomenon where multiple domestic entities are undertaking different aspects of foreign policy making and implementation. Moreover, this is enacted in a fragmented space where competing financial institutions, energy companies, think tanks, media and provincial governments can all claim their own stake (Jakobson & Knox, 2010; Zhu, 2008). Three factors have been offered to explain such a pluralisation.

First, China's unprecedented rise and the sheer expansion of its international engagement —covering issues such as energy, arms, and trade — has made the process of pluralisation more necessary, with China inevitably relying on a range of intermediaries and a diverse set of sub-state actors operating overseas to fulfil its goals (Jakobson & Knox, 2010). The second consideration is the level of disaggregation of the Chinese state. Here, decentralisation policies have increased the power of provincial governments and special administrative regions, which now play a very active role in foreign affairs (Hameiri et al., 2019). This tendency is more evident in Chinese provinces bordering neighbouring countries. The economic reform and opening-up policies, launched under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, granted Chinese provinces extensive responsibilities in local affairs and made them important players in the Chinese political economy. They also increased the engagement of provincial governments in foreign relations. As highlighted by Chen, "the twin forces of decentralisation and internationalisation not only further upgrade the salience of provinces within China, but also turn them into some sort of international actors, particularly in the foreign economic relations" (Chen, 2005). The fact that provincial party secretaries are ranked equally to ministers in the central government further enhances the importance of provincial authorities (Jia et al., 2015; Caro, 2023). Finally, as a range of Chinese actors with transnational interests engage internationally, they extend China's 'governance frontiers' to other states (Jones and Hameiri, 2015; Jones and Hameiri, 2021). This report borrows from the rich scholarship on the pluralisation and evolution of Chinese policy making to explore how Chinese domestic policy actors have shaped both the discourse and practice of China's conflict management. In particular, it focuses on three key domestic actors: think tanks, provincial governments and state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Although the focus on such actors does not fully capture the entirety of the domestic policy making and implementation landscape in China, this approach is illustrative of the different ways in which domestic actors influence and shape China's conflict management.

The Role of Scholars and Think Tanks in Shaping the Foundation of Chinese Peace

Over the past ten years, there has been a significant expansion of think-tanks in China, which has been promoted by new government policies. In its "Decision on Major Issues concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reform" of 2013, the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China called to "strengthen the building of new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics, and establish a sound decision-making consultation system" (*China Daily*, 2013).

Scholars have highlighted that China's expanding role in global affairs has created opportunities for Chinese think tanks to perform different functions, including influencing the Chinese policy process (Menegazzi, 2018; Zhu, 2013). Despite China's one-party rule, think tanks and policy research institutions are seen as key actors in the study of Chinese politics, playing an important role in "filling a knowledge-gap between the Chinese political elites and China's changing society" (Menegazzi, 2018). Other analyses, however, emphasise the limitations of Chinese think tanks. In comparing commonalities and differences between thinks tanks in China and in Western countries, Wang and Hu conclude that the specific characteristics of Chinese think tanks — in particular, their close relationship with the party-state apparatus and the way they carry out their functions — hinder the effectiveness of policy making contributions and efforts to increase the country's soft power (Wang and Hu, 2017). According to this view, although think tanks may be a useful instrument for the party-state to inform and guide public opinion in China, their role is primarily to contribute ideas on how best to execute government policies (ibid).

From a peacebuilding perspective, the flourishing of China's think tanks highlights the need to investigate how think tanks and scholars perform in the peace and conflict management domains. In particular, consideration should be applied to how they have shaped the discourse, norms and practice of China's international approach to managing peace and security dilemmas.

China's current peace model for managing conflicts puts emphasis on 'developmental peace' (发展和平 fāzhǎn hépíng), which promotes socio-economic development as the vital precondition of a sustainable peace (Mariani, 2022). The introduction and acceptance of China's developmental peace concept is emblematic of the role of Chinese think tanks and scholars in China's evolving approaches to peace and conflict management.

While 'developmental peace' originates from China's own domestic experience (Yuan, 2020), it was discursively framed and articulated by He Yin, who is associated with the Academy of the People's Armed Police and has been able to use his institutional affiliations and network to influence China's embrace and uptake of the concept (Abb, 2021).

'Developmental peace' was first articulated by He in 2014 (He, 2014), but did not immediately catch the attention of the academic and policy community, as shown by the number of Chinese academic papers devoted to this topic that were produced between 2014-2017. However, after the publication of a new article by He titled "Developmental Peace: Chinese Approach to U.N. Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding" in 2017 (He, 2017), the developmental peace concept started to generate increasing interest until it became commonly used and referenced in China's academic and policy circles. Internet search results through the *China National Knowledge Infrastructure* (CNKI) — an electronic platform integrating Chinese knowledge-based information resources —demonstrate a spike in the publication of academic articles covering the topic of 'developmental peace' after He published his 2017 article (Figure 1). He's article on developmental peace also triggered significant debate with wide range of discussions and scholarly exchanges and follow-up studies.

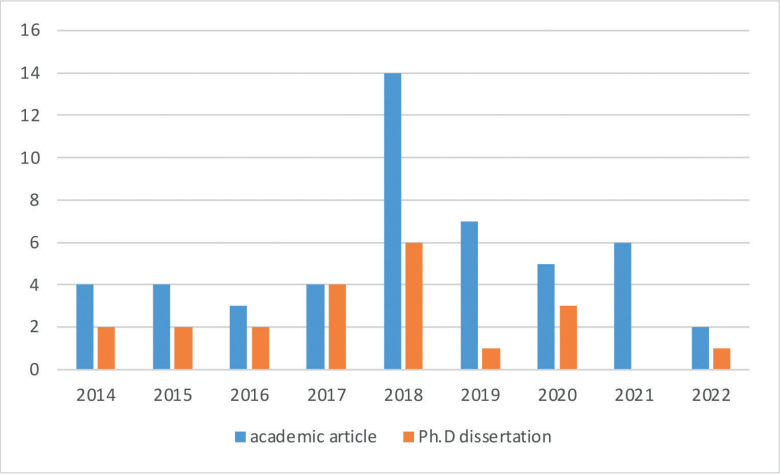

Figure 1: Chinese articles and dissertations on 'developmental peace'

Since then, Chinese officials have also increasingly come to use the framework 'development for peace' to distinguish their outlook from the liberal peace approaches of the West. They have also used it to highlight the failure of the liberal peacebuilding project and its disregard for developmental needs (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China, 2022; Zhang, 2022; Li, 2022; The State Council, 2021, 2019, 2011; MFAPRC, 2022; Yuan, 2020). For instance, at the UN Security Council Open Debate on Post-conflict Peacebuilding, China's ambassador Liu Zhenmin asserted: "Without development, justice and the rule of law are only castles in the air" (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, 2009).

Developmental peace has also found a new salience with the implementation of the China's Belt and Road initiative (BRI), a global infrastructure development venture that aims to stimulate growth and boost international trade. With many BRI projects located in fragile and conflict-prone regions, China has gradually accumulated experience and lessons to inform and further its developmental peace model.

The institutionalisation of the developmental peace concept has been enabled by domestic deliberations among the think tank community and broader public debate. Following the uptake of the concept by the scholarly community, the concept's adoption was facilitated by the institutional access that think tanks have with the traditional policy making establishment.

Think tanks in China are usually connected to the formal foreign policy making establishment, both through institutional allegiance and personal relationships (Interview 3; Jakobson and Knox, 2010). These channels in turn act as a key node, linking think tanks' proposals to the policy-making process. Some think tanks' institutional access is more limited while others have more substantial and direct access, due to their affiliation with branches of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the Chinese Government, and the People's Liberation Army (PLA), which remain the ultimate decision makers and maintain responsibility for China's strategic choices. While the details of personal and institutional relationships with decision-making entities remain obscure – for example, it is not possible to evaluate with certainty the degree of influence that a specific think tank, or person, has on any given official decision (Interview 3) — their instrumental role in the consensus building and decision-making processes in China makes them an important avenue for influencing decision making.

Beyond this, the broader uptake of the developmental peace concept has also depended on public outreach and debate. This refers to a variety of public arenas where scholars from different think tanks, academic institutions, businesses, CPC officials, government and military institutions have opportunities to interact. There are two main types of outreach: the first focuses on academic exchanges and is mostly confined to scholarly debates, and the second is where academia has direct interactions with official actors, often during seminars and other public events. Over the past few years, for example, numerous seminars devoted to China's participation in UN peace operations that involved officials and scholars have provided opportunities for cross-fertilisation of ideas and concepts among officials, scholars and think tank experts.

Taken together, the rise and institutionalisation of the concept of 'developmental peace' shows how a concept travels from the outside to the inside of the policy apparatus and becomes embraced by official actors. It also demonstrates the three ways in which think tanks can influence and shape foreign policy, specifically through publications, institutional access and broader outreach activities. The next section will show how an additional and distinct actor, local government, plays a role in China's conflict management.

The Role of Provinces: Yunnan Local Government and Myanmar

Provincial governments, particularly in provinces that share international borders, can also play a role in China's conflict management apparatus. The Yunnan province, China's gateway to Southeast Asia, which shares a 1357-mile, rather porous, border with Myanmar, has influenced both the conflict dynamics as well as prospects for peace in Myanmar.

China's priorities in Myanmar encompass a broad range of interests: border stability; access to the Indian Ocean via Myanmar; obtaining alternative routes for the supply of oil and gas; and protecting its trade and investment (Yhome, 2019). All of these priorities have resulted in Myanmar's integration into many of China's internal development plans, including two key strategies launched in 1999: the 'Going Out Strategy' (走出去战略) and 'The Great Western Development Project' (西部大开发). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which includes the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), seeks to further these strategic priorities (Olinga-Shannon et al., 2019).

China's engagement with Myanmar has been challenging, due to the multiple insurgencies, the authoritarian governance overseen by a military junta, and ongoing violence and repression that define the fragmented political landscape of the country. Myanmar has twenty-plus ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) that, for decades, have fought each other as well as the country's military (Tatmadaw) over demands for autonomy (Smith, 2010). With the China-Myanmar border region largely under the control of a motley assortment of EAOs and with endemic fighting in the ethnic borderlands, Chinese businesses are inextricably tied to the local conflict economy. After the military coup in 2021, the level of fragmentation and violence has further increased. The formation of many People's Defence Forces loosely aligned with the alternative government formed by the democratic opposition, the National Unity Government (NUG), and Local Defence Forces, which are largely autonomous, has meant that violence has continued to spread, even to regions which, for decades, had remained stable (Hein, 2022).

Within the wider rubric of China-Myanmar relations, the Yunnan provincial government has been a key player in framing and delivering on China economic, diplomatic and security engagement in Myanmar in various ways. The Yunnan provincial actors were key to the formulation of the strategic narrative of the 'Malacca Dilemma' [1], framing China's reliance on the Malacca strait as a key energy security concern, and persuading Beijing to invest in alternative energy routes via Myanmar through Yunnan. The concept has led to Yunnan being seen as a hub to Myanmar and a bridge to South and Southeast Asia (Singh, 2016; Li and Li, 2022).

Additionally, provincial interests have defined the scope of China's engagement in Myanmar. Cross-border security, in particular the risk of the conflict endangering the safety of investments, trade and energy supplies and spilling over the border into Chinese territory through refugee flows, has shaped the contours of Chinese engagement. According to one analyst, "China's bottom-line interest lies in a tranquil border, meaning no war and no conflict" (Li, 2020). One interviewee argues that the engagement of Yunnan's provincial authorities is to enable contracts, MOUs and economic and trade relationships; their peace and security engagement, then, is motivated by "a desire to reduce tensions and pave the way for their infrastructure and connectivity projects" (Interview 1).

Finally, the province has also been at the centre of China's diplomatic and mediation activities. Since 2012, China has been closely involved in the peace process in Myanmar, appointing special envoys for Asian Affairs who focused on the Myanmar peace process. China exerted pressure on the EAOs, especially in the Northern borderlands, to attend key peace talks and to sign in 2015 the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) between the government of Myanmar and various EAOs. China's mediation between the Myanmar military and the Northern Alliance resulted in the bloc's four EAOs — the Arakan Army (AA), Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) — attending the 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference, which was initiated by then-State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in 2017 (Kumbun, 2019). Although mediation initiatives have been led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing, the Yunnan provincial authorities have leveraged the province's proximity to Myanmar, as well as its historic engagement with various EAOs (Yu & Ridout, 2021), transmitting information and assessments, encouraging peace talks between Myanmar and ethnic rebels, and providing venues and security guarantees to participants involved in peace talks.

Between 2012 and 2013, the western Yunnan city of Ruili hosted at least three rounds of peace talks between representatives from the Myanmar government and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the military wing of the KIO (MFAPRC, 2013; *The Observer,* 2013; UN 2013; Jinghpawland, 2012). By assuming the role of coordinator and 'witness' between the KIO and the Myanmar government, China positioned itself openly as a mediator (Sun, 2013) and guarantor of any agreement between the parties. Between 2016 and 2018, four China-Myanmar 2+2 High Level Consultation Mechanism meetings between the foreign ministries and defence ministries of China and Myanmar took place in Kunming, the provincial capital of Yunnan (Xinhua, 2016, 2017 and 2018). Focused on reaching high-level consensus on cooperation to manage the conflict in Northern Myanmar and secure stability, the meetings called for restraint by all warring parties and the implementation of cease-fires. Similarly, in September 2018, Kunming was the venue of peace talks between members of the Myanmar government Peace Commission and representatives of the Arakan Army (AA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), three ethnic armies from the Northern Alliance military coalition that had not yet signed the 2015 NCA (*The Observer,* 2018; Khine, 2018). The meeting was facilitated by Sun Guoxiang, Beijing's then-special envoy for Asian affairs. Also in 2018, Tatmadaw and KIO delegations reportedly met twice in Dali City in Yunnan. Post-coup, the bilateral meetings have continued. Media reports suggest that in December 2022 representatives of seven EAOs, including three — the KIA, TNLA and MNDAA — that are actively fighting the regime, met the new Chinese special envoy for Asian affairs, Deng Xijun, in Yunnan. After meeting the EAOs, the Chinese special envoy reportedly travelled to Naypyitaw to meet junta leaders (Sohu, 2022; *The Irrawaddy,* 2022).

However, Chinese reliance on EAOs based in the Northern Myanmar-China borderlands — who are themselves dependent on state and non-state actors in Yunnan for access to markets, arms, safe havens, and revenue generation, through taxation of imported products, the trade of raw materials, and investment in mining — has raised questions about the role of the Yunnan province (Clapp, 2015; Haacke, 2010). It has also highlighted inconsistencies in the approach of China, which is seen to have 'hedged its bets', by supporting the central military government through defence cooperation and diplomatic engagement, while also endorsing and supporting various EAOs (Interview 1). For example, there have been reports of EAOs, like the United Wa State Army (UWSA), in the self-proclaimed Wa State buying military trucks and light weapons from China (Slodkowski and Lee, 2016), although the Chinese Defence Ministry has denied selling weapons to the Wa (ibid). Such contradictions have generated doubts as to whether China can be an honest broker in the peace process in Myanmar (Kumbun, 2019).

Given the nature of China's political system, as one interviewee highlights, it is not possible for provincial governments to adopt and implement major policies without securing Beijing's approval (Interview 3). Yet, as highlighted above, case evidence in Yunnan points to significant scope for sub-state actors to shape or impact the center's foreign policy, even within the constraints of a top-down political system. In pursuit of parochial economic interests, the province of Yunnan's influence on China's economic, diplomatic and security engagement in Myanmar has had important and sensitive implications for China's conflict management efforts.

State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs): the Push for Chinese Engagement in Sudan and South Sudan

As a "hybrid of corporate organization and government ministry" Chinese SOEs have great authority and power. Moreover, their relationship with the Communist Party and government authorities "should not be characterized as a submissive one" (Yu and Ridout, 2021). SOEs have been both a tool and a driver of the changes in China's foreign policy – their expansion and exposure have initially been propelled by foreign policy changes, while they also inform and shape China's foreign policy. SOEs are also key actors at the local level, impacting on development and security dynamics, especially when they operate in fragile and conflict-affected societies.

Studies have already examined the political influence of Chinese businesses on foreign policy making. Although SOEs appear to be "actors on the margins" in the majority of foreign policy decisions, there is also a "symbiotic relationship" between the top management of large SOEs and the Chinese political leadership (Jakobson & Knox, 2010). It is hard to over-estimate the crucial role of Chinese SOEs in China's foreign policy, its pursuit of 'state capitalism' and its so-called 'Go Global' strategy. In Africa, SOEs pioneered China's inroads into the continent, shouldering the responsibilities of building and expanding cooperation with African countries (Xu, 2014); and additionally making their first large foreign investments there. Sudan, in particular, was the first country where the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) – China's leading national oil company – made a large scale overseas investment, which gave the company the opportunity to test its international competitiveness. There is ample evidence of the role and agency of Chinese SOEs, whose executives hold ranks equivalent to a minister or provincial governor (Yu & Ridout, 2021) and are often present when foreign policy issues are discussed (Jakobson & Knox, 2010), in the formulation and implementation of China's foreign economic policy. But their role extends beyond China's economic relations with other countries, especially when corporate security is concerned.

Sudan and South Sudan – and Africa more widely – offer vivid examples of the SOEs' exposure to high political risk through overseas investment in conflict-affected environments. They have also been a proving ground for China's pro-active diplomacy and the site of China's evolving global political and security engagement aimed at reconciling the complex relationships between peace, economic development and conflict (Large, 2016). While SOEs do not have any formal authority on foreign policy and on matters of international peace and security, the scope and magnitude of their activities give them considerable influence in the foreign locations where they implement projects, which then impacts all levels of China's bilateral relationships. Their interactions with host government authorities has inevitably had important implications for China's engagement in local peace and security affairs.

In 2007, when violence in Sudan escalated and threatened both Chinese oil investments and Chinese nationals, China had to adopt a more "hands-on" security and political engagement and found a peacemaking role (Paczyńska, 2021; Large, 2016; Logo & Mariani, 2022; ICG, 2017). In response to international criticism and calls to boycott the Beijing Olympic Games, China experimented with mediation 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 future engagement in mediation in South Sudan, where China is the single largest economic investor and the single largest buyer of crude oil. Using its capabilities and influence in South Sudan, China became involved in the IGAD-led peace and domestic reconciliation process. When South Sudan relapsed into civil war in 2014, China's "creative mediation diplomacy" (Sultan & Sun, 2020) contributed to bringing the main warring parties to the negotiating table (Logo & Mariani, 2022).

As a major strategic SOE with significant shares in the two main oil operation consortia in South Sudan — the Dar Petroleum Operating Company (DPOC) and the Greater Petroleum Operating Company (GPOC) — CNPC has unique economic, development and security leverage in South Sudan. One South Sudanese expert highlights the "often invisible hand" of Chinese oil executives in China's security engagement in South Sudan and the importance of crucial discussions that they hold outside the public media limelight (Interview 2).

According to the interviewee, "oil companies in South Sudan try to pursue their commercial interests, but become inevitably entangled into a web of business and security concerns" (ibid). This has affected in particular China's emergency responses to the conflict and efforts to secure assets and personnel.

Large highlights that when the conflict erupted in South Sudan in December 2013, CNPC took action to organise an emergency response. Amid continued fighting, the evacuation of Chinese oil workers (Sohu, 2013; Sina, 2013; *Reuters,* 2013) on company airplanes ensured that CNPC and the Chinese government were seen as acting quickly to protect Chinese nationals (MFAPRC, 2013; People.cn, 2013; *ChinaNews,* 2013), a sensitive topic that, once the focus of public attention, may give rise to public dissatisfaction and questions about the government's abilities to defend China's core interests. The staff of other Chinese companies working in South Sudan, like Sinohydro, were also evacuated via Chinese or other channels, such as the UN. This created a pattern for CNPC's responses to the subsequent flare ups of conflict in oil-producing parts of South Sudan (Large, 2016). In May 2015, for example, China had to evacuate more than 400 workers from Paloich — one of the most productive oil areas in the Upper Nile state — (*The Paper,* 2015). When fighting resumed in Juba in July 2016, CNPC issued a statement saying that it had evacuated most of its workers from South Sudan, although its operations were unaffected (*Reuters,* 2016). The company made use of its earlier experience of operating in a conflict-affected environment in Sudan to respond to South Sudan's outbursts of ethnic fighting after December 2013. It used procedures developed to respond to such situations and deepened its experience of operating in a conflict-affected environment. Despite disruptions in oil production and reduced profits, CNPC's crisis response "demonstrated the advances it had made in managing corporate risk through practical investment protection, apparently including local security partnerships" (Large, 2016).

There is an interest shared by both Chinese state oil corporations and the Chinese government to protect oil investments and the welfare of Chinese workers in regions affected by conflict. In 2014, China secured the inclusion of the protection of oil installations and their employees within the mandate of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) (UNSC, 2014 Resolution 2155) and in 2015, it provided an infantry battalion to the UNMISS mission — the first Chinese peacekeeping infantry battalion to be deployed in a UN peace operation (Logo and Mariani, 2022).

Over the past 15 years, recurrent armed violence and interlocking civil wars in the Sudans have tested CNPC's political risk management skills and have forced the company to make hard and soft changes to its security policies (Patey, 2014). In addition to installing early warning systems in overseas subsidiaries and carrying out security training for international staff detailing how to respond to kidnappings and other security incidents, the company has started to change its soft approach and develop a dialogue with local communities, media and civil society. It has taken part in corporate social responsibility workshops hosted by international NGOs (*Saferworld,* 2014) and Sudanese civil society and engaged international risk consultants (Patey, 2014). The company has also tried to cultivate a reputation for being not only an important partner in South Sudan's oil industry (by making contributions to the country's economic development and stability) but also as a socially responsible corporate actor (Lu, 2016; Cui & Li, 2017; *China National Radio,* 2016) and a provider of humanitarian assistance. Since the outbreak of the civil war, CNPC has provided humanitarian assistance for the protection of civilian sites in South Sudan (Embassy of China, 2017) and in 2021 it made donations for flood disaster relief (Ministry of Commerce, 2021).

All in all, the engagement of CNPC in Sudan and South Sudan demonstrates how a huge oil corporation, that operates in conflict and post-conflict environments that are heavily dependent on oil revenues, is both affected by and affects local peace and conflict dynamics. In such contexts, CNPC's aspirations to develop relationships exclusively based on trade, investments and resource extraction were never realised. In order to safeguard its business interests entangled in interlocking conflicts, the company required a more meaningful Chinese participation in Sudan's and South Sudan's conflict management processes.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Western Actors

China is not a coherent monolithic bloc. Within the "fragmentation and disaggregation" (Hameiri and Jones, 2016) of the Chinese state apparatus, domestic sub-state actors – including think tanks, provincial governments and state-owned enterprises – are increasingly shaping China's engagement in conflict and post-conflict societies. Think tanks and experts, sub-national entities, and corporate actors — to name a few — operate on the margins of the official confines of the single-party state. China's growing importance, and its involvement in global affairs, have also created opportunities for a number of often-disparate actors (including those operating on the boundaries of the official system) to engage at different levels in conflict and post-conflict societies. With varied interests and motivations, they have stakes and a say in China's foreign engagement and are increasingly influencing and implementing different aspects of Chinese foreign policy. Our findings suggest that they are also front and centre of China's efforts to reconcile complex relationships between peace, economic development and conflict, profoundly shaping China's peace and security engagement.

While this paper has shed more light on a specific set of sub-state Chinese actors who mould the thinking, policies and behaviour of China's peace and security engagement, a more detailed and nuanced analysis of the actors and factors that affect the formulation and implementation of China's engagement in conflict management is needed for a further understanding of China's approach to international conflict management. This should happen alongside increased international dialogue and efforts to establish, or in some cases re-establish, effective dialogue mechanisms with some of the Chinese actors mentioned in this report.

In an environment of incomplete information, there is a need to pursue and enhance collaboration with Chinese scholars and think tanks. In particular, collaborative research projects focusing on how China interacts with conflict-affected and fragile countries would provide a fruitful way to better understand China's decision-making and behaviour in conflict and post-conflict societies. They, in turn, would allow China to consider the problem of unknown motivations and perceptions of foreign actors, making choices based, in part, on what other actors are likely to do in the future. Despite increased activism over the past decade, China remains a relatively new global peace and security actor, with knowledge and capacity gaps that hinder its international engagement. It lacks the network of field-based NGOs that Western countries can leverage to complement their diplomats' knowledge.

Specific country knowledge, for example, regarding Africa and the Middle East, is underdeveloped while conflict management is still a nascent discipline. There is also limited knowledge of local public opinion on China's economic and political influence and of the impact of Chinese engagement on local communities. International exchanges between Chinese and foreign scholars and think tanks can help to fill some of these gaps. The COVID pandemic has negatively impacted international relations by slowing down international exchanges on all fronts. Now that China has re-opened its borders and Chinese leaders appear intent to rebuild ties abroad and to be at the forefront of mediation efforts from Ukraine to the Middle East, there are opportunities for Western actors to re-engage with a broad spectrum of Chinese official and unofficial actors, including think tanks and academics whose perspectives and concerns matter for China's norms and practices in conflict-affected and fragile societies.

China's border provinces, in particular the Yunnan province that borders Myanmar, have not overlooked or brushed aside the importance of peace and security issues in their international portfolio. It is, however, critical to engage with provincial authorities and the think tanks that are affiliated with them on the issue of China's neighbourhood policy, as well as the contributions they make to conflict management initiatives. Improving transparency and communication regarding the contributions that provincial authorities can make to peace processes in Myanmar could help build trust and allay concerns by local actors in Myanmar, as well as international actors, who have called into question relations between Myanmar and China.

While it can be argued that exposure to conflict and political risks has changed Chinese companies' (and especially SOEs') security approaches and practices in conflict affected societies where their investments are entangled in local identity politics, tensions and conflict, becoming more responsible global citizens is still very much work in progress. Their actions remain insufficient in addressing the risks associated with their operations and taking the appropriate actions needed to avoid reinforcing conflict dynamics and to capitalise on opportunities to support peace. There is a need, in particular, to find the appropriate channels to continue to promote dialogue and cooperation with companies like CNPC and other SOEs in order to help institutionalise conflict-sensitive business practice (CSBP), facilitate dialogues that bring company representatives, local authorities and communities together, encourage companies to dedicate resources to mitigate risks, reduce conflict, enable peace and adopt and implement transparency and accountability mechanisms.

This could potentially yield peace dividends for the safety, security, livelihoods and well-being of communities impacted by Chinese oil investments, while improving China's and Chinese companies' reputations, thus protecting their 'social licence to operate'.

Taken together, the key findings offered in this paper demonstrate the role of Chinese domestic actors in shaping the discourse and practice of China's conflict management and have filled in some of the gaps in knowledge around this topic. While recognising the limitations of our analysis, we believe that both our findings and recommendations provide a basis on which to build more in-depth analysis and dialogue on the contextual factors and mechanisms through which Chinese domestic actors engage and impact on international conflict management.

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[1] The expression 'Malacca Dilemma' was first used by former Chinese President Hu Jintao in November 2003. He referred to China's strategic dependence on ship-borne energy resources and its vulnerability to the ability of the US Navy to control navigation through the Malacca Strait. This issue has been used as justification for efforts to diversify energy transportation routes.

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PeaceRep is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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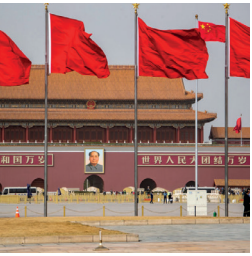

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