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ON BECOMING A RESPONSIBLE GREAT POWER: CONTEXTUALISING CHINA'S FORAY INTO HUMAN RIGHTS AND PEACE & SECURITY IN AFRICA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The deepening of China's engagement with Africa has also prompted the broadening of its interests on the continent. This has resulted in China's expansion into increasingly riskier territories, which means there is a greater urgency to protect its interests from the political vagaries endemic to conflict-affected African states. This evolution marks a shift away from traditional perceptions of Chinese engagement in Africa as being limited to its economic interests, towards one where China becomes a politically interested and invested actor. This trend is paralleled by a macro-level reorientation of China's foreign policy goals, where it envisions itself playing a stronger norm-setting role in the global arena. This policy insights paper explores the values and imperatives that motivate China's engagement in peace and security, human rights and human security in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

'Whether China likes it or not, it plays a significant role in peace and security in Africa; negatively, through its absence, and positively, through an increased partnership with African states and institutions working for peace and security.'[1]

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China–Africa relations have evolved since the first Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) ministerial meeting in 2000, and are now far more diverse and nuanced than generalised views, stubbornly centred on economics and resource extraction, would indicate. The deeper China has become involved in multilateral organisations and particular societies – and as greater numbers of Chinese have relocated (either temporarily or permanently) to Africa – the more it has been drawn into political matters. In a context of highly unstable political environments, Chinese researchers and policymakers have been discussing changing practices on non-interference in internal affairs, as well as newer definitions of peacebuilding that reflect Chinese characteristics. Additionally, they have been contributing to the debate on the 'Responsibility to Protect' by reinterpreting this as 'responsible protection', signalling an ambition to be a norms-maker.[2] This has seen China become more engaged in peace and security matters, which was formalised through a strong peace and security initiative at the fourth FOCAC meeting in 2012, and reinforced through expanding commitments to UN peacekeeping in 2015[3] and more active efforts to resolve conflicts.

In this respect, any China–Africa analysis requires careful consideration of context: making sense of changes at the level of individual African states as well as China's own evolving approach, which is a product of its growing experience in Africa, global dynamics and shifting domestic forces. For instance, China is perceived to be pursuing a more assertive foreign policy, as seen in its leading role in UN initiatives in Sudan and Somalia as far back as 2007, and via the deployment of its peacekeepers in UN missions. This shift links up with the growing exposure of Chinese economic interests in key sectors in Africa and the complexities faced by the variety of Chinese actors operating across the continent, thereby reaffirming China's changing and multifaceted approach.

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Importantly, the FOCAC process highlights the adaptive nature of China's engagement with Africa, where it is responding dynamically to emerging developments. Against the backdrop of the Arab Spring and regime change in Libya, the FOCAC V ministerial in 2012 focused on growing risks to Chinese economic interests in Africa. Most notably, FOCAC V established the China–Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security to provide financial assistance, capacity building and other forms of institutionalised support for Africa's efforts at fostering peace and security on the continent. These trends were reinforced by the financial and diplomatic commitments made in early December 2015 at FOCAC VI in Johannesburg.

Despite China's official 'non-interference' policy, Beijing displayed new thinking regarding the importance of engaging more deeply with stability and peacebuilding in Africa. Significantly, the AU was admitted as a full member of the FOCAC process prior to the ministerial meeting, paving the way for closer collaboration.[4] In early 2015 China and the AU also signed an agreement to connect major capital cities through transport routes,[5] and collaboration was further expanded in May 2015 when China officially opened its permanent mission to the AU.

In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of China, as a country and through its multiplicity of actors, greater attention needs to be paid to the diverse economic, sociological and political circumstances of African countries. This is because China's engagement in Africa is influenced in tone and texture by the 'recipient'

country with which it engages. Therefore, China's relationship with South Africa differs from that with Angola, for example, because of differing domestic exigencies. Consequently, it is important to unpack Beijing's general approach to human rights, human security and governance capacity building, especially as it manifests in its foreign policy activities, as well as the specific bilateral context in which these policies unfold.

China's approach to the thematic areas identified above has changed over time, and developments across Africa have played an important role in that regard. The evolution of China's official thinking on these matters can be discerned in two areas. The first is human rights and human security, which reflects strong domestic antecedents in the way the Chinese Communist Party itself has interpreted human rights and security at home. The second is peace and security, which encompasses China's involvement in UN peacekeeping activities and its peacebuilding role. Governance capacity building may be considered part of that, ie, as a function of peacebuilding, but also includes a range of other security-related issues. Underpinning both is China's past adherence to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states and respect for sovereignty. Both elements tend to emphasise state security and stability over the more expansive notion of human security, the advancement of which sometimes requires that the principle of non-interference be violated.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND HUMAN SECURITY

Human rights are one of the most contentious areas in China's contemporary relations with Africa. This is partly due to China's own questionable domestic record, and its active support for non-interference in both multilateral settings and bilateral relations at a time when norms and global governance structures are advancing the importance of human security and recognising that sovereignty should not be the refuge of the rogue. This is most pertinently captured in the Constitutive Act of the AU, where in Article 4 (h) AU member states support the 'right of the Union to intervene in a Member State pursuant to a decision of the Assembly in respect of grave circumstances, namely war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity'.[6]

There are concerns in Africa that China's willingness to do business with and support brutal regimes, such as the Sudanese government, helps to entrench poor governance. This may hamper the progress made by domestic civil society actors and external supporters to broaden the political space and strengthen accountability regimes. Some critics have argued that China's business relations with authoritarian regimes on the continent have also had a negative impact on Africa's economic development and civil–political rights.[7] One recent study has even gone so far as arguing that Chinese aid not only supports the continuity of rogue and pariah states in Africa but also creates them by fostering political violence and the use of force by the state.[8]

Chinese policymakers counter this critique, emphasising China's engagement on second-generation (socio-economic) rights in Africa, such as its contribution to development through economic relations, education, agriculture, infrastructure and health co-operation.[9] Indeed, the Chinese government has consistently argued that

socio-economic rights and the right to development should be given priority over civil and political rights, which have traditionally been emphasised by the West.[10] China's 'Progress in China's Human Rights' White Paper (2014)[11] begins with an emphasis on the right to development (including better protected economic, social and cultural rights). Moreover, it is the historical understanding that the basic unit of the Chinese society is the family rather than the individual.[12] Through communist rule this was focused on the collective in the form of the Communist Party of China and more specifically the *danwei* (or work unit, under socialist pre-reform China), where the individual is subsumed into a broader collective in both cases. China's approach to security issues in Africa thus appears to reflect its emphasis on second-generation rights in its own domestic context. This emphasis is not necessarily unique to China, with a similar approach to human rights taken by other 'Southern' countries, including South Africa.[13]

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China's recent actions in multilateral forums and bilateral engagements demonstrate an increasingly nuanced approach to human rights, especially against the background of the need to ensure a degree of stability in countries where it has vital economic interests. This is closely linked with its increased participation in UN peace and security initiatives. In addition, some scholars in China also believe that human rights constitute a 'normative pillar of the world order exert[ing] a pervasive impact on how states are treated in the international society. Human rights cannot be simply trumped by power or bargained away.'[14]

As China emerged from the Maoist era and embarked on a series of reforms, many in the West hoped that this would also lead to greater political liberalisation.[15] This changed after the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989 with the West's imposition of arms embargos, without its re-orienting China's stance on human rights in the long run. By the turn of the century, as the links between external private commercial interests seeking to do business in China and national economic considerations became more apparent, criticism of China's domestic human rights record became much more muted in Europe.[16] The more recent increase in official Western criticism of the impact of Chinese engagement in Africa and its disinterest in human rights abuses (in particular expressed in the US) emanates from the fear that it provides Chinese companies with a comparative advantage over Western actors.[17]

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As for human security, the concept was introduced in the 1994 UN Human Development Report as 'freedom from fear, and freedom from want'. This was further broken up into seven 'essential dimensions of human security', ie, economic, health, personal, political, food, environment and community.[18] Although this definition can be used to analyse a wide range of either explicit or implicit issues relating to human development, the core tenet is 'the right to live in freedom and dignity, free from poverty and despair … with an equal opportunity to enjoy all their rights and fully develop their human potential'.[19]

Human security is traditionally viewed as a Western concept that does not fit into the Chinese historical and social context, and the term only entered the Chinese mainstream academic discourse in the early 2000s.[20] The outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome in South China in 2003, the Boxing Day tsunami in Indonesia in 2004 and the bird flu outbreak in 2006 – all regarded as non-traditional security threats by Western analysts – motivated China to start taking an interest in human

security, albeit based on its own interpretation thereof. An overview of Chinese academic work on human security reveals that China draws on both traditionally Western and non-traditional security approaches. Thus the 'seven dimensions of human security with Chinese characteristics'[21] have been identified as economic security, political and societal security, health security, food security, personal security, community and cultural security, and ecological and environmental security.

The Chinese version of human security therefore views human rights through an emphasis on the collective, which 'results in a Chinese version of the concept where the state remains a key reference point and actor – indeed, the state is the key guarantor of human security, not a threat to it'.[22] The corollary of this approach is that in order to achieve optimum conditions for human security, all efforts must be directed towards bolstering the state.

It can be argued that China's engagement in Africa may contribute to human security objectives on many fronts, such as through its agricultural projects or health programmes. A recent example is China's response to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in December 2013. Its intervention – deploying a mobile lab team, medical experts, and supplies – was much lauded by African states. Analysts have noted that its overarching horizontal approach to health matters, in contrast with the West's more vertical approach that targets the disease without seeking to integrate measures into the country's healthcare system, is an important lesson for co-operation between the West and China.[23]

PEACE AND SECURITY

The first time China voted on a peacekeeping resolution in the UN Security Council (UNSC) was in 1981. Prior to that Beijing had assiduously avoided doing so, considering UN peacekeeping to be a tool of the two superpowers to exert their influence in developing countries.[24] Since the 1990s, however, its engagement has grown significantly, and China is now the largest contributor of troops among the permanent members of the UNSC.[25] China's commitment to peacekeeping was also reflected in its 2004 White Paper for National Defence. According to a Chinese analyst, China's peacekeeping activities have allowed it to raise its international profile, improve relations with host countries and Western governments, and protect Chinese interests abroad.[26]

In the process, China's approach to state sovereignty and non-interference has become more nuanced, characterised by greater flexibility and pragmatism, as it has also come to recognise the importance of being perceived as a responsible great power. A strong proponent of UN peacekeeping mandates rather than unilateral ones (or coalitions of the willing), China appreciates that UN interventions are important tools for promoting regional stability and security.[27] Yet its official guidelines on legitimate intervention include securing an invitation from the concerned state.[28] This played itself out in the case of Darfur where, prior to 2006, China was opposed to any UNSC resolution that did not have the support of the host government, which was perpetrating the atrocities in Darfur. Its subsequent exertion of pressure on Khartoum was the first milestone in its African peace and security engagement.

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The UN-sanctioned intervention in Libya – China abstained from voting on it in the UNSC – unambiguously highlighted the difficult terrain China has to negotiate between respecting the principle of non-interference and ensuring stability in countries where it has substantial economic interests. Sceats and Breslin argue that after the Arab Spring the Chinese government emerged as a spokesperson for states seeking 'to affirm the paramount responsibility of the state to enforce public order'.[29] At the same time, Chinese commentators in the blogosphere emphasised the government's responsibility to protect Chinese citizens and assets in countries undergoing massive civil unrest. In this increasingly complex contemporary context, Alden identifies three security drivers for China's changing engagement on peace and security matters: reputational, firm-level and the protection of citizens.[30]

In Africa, China has deployed troops under UN command in peace-support operations in Liberia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, South Sudan, and Mali. In 2012 China and the AU signed the China–Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security as part of the FOCAC process. Alden argues, however, that this 'aspirational commitment to a more institutionalised form of involvement' may be more difficult to realise because of 'China's uncertainty as to the implications for its established interests and an underlying ambivalence towards the normative dimensions of the African Peace and Security Architecture'.[31]

Over the years China has also moved into peacebuilding, concomitantly making financial contributions to the UN Peacebuilding Fund. Whereas peacekeeping aims to reduce armed conflict, peacebuilding is a far more encompassing term that focuses on the longer-term developmental aspects of post-conflict societies that are essential building blocks of a positive peace. However, as with human rights, there are conceptual differences between the Chinese and Western understanding of the term. These differences are explored in Table 1.

TABLE 1 DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ON THE IMPLICATIONS OF PEACEBUILDING

Industry sector	Western (or traditional) perspective	China's perspective
Objective/ priority	Liberal democracy	Development
Focus	Good governance	Good government
Principle	Promote democracy and intervene where necessary	Assistance orientated and non-intervention
Strategic culture	Pre-emptive	Reactive
Method	Top-down and bottom-up (ie, prepare for new constitution, hold national elections, build multiparty system and/or strengthen civil society)	Top-down (ie, strengthen state capacity, enhance national identification and national reconciliation and/or promote economic recovery)
Challenges to	Local ownership	Public participation

Source: Zhao L, 'China's influence on the future of UN peacekeeping', in *Beyond the 'New Horizon': UN Peacekeeping Future Challenges*, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs & Geneva Centre for Security Policy Seminar Proceedings, Geneva, 23–24 June 2010, pp. 86–98

While the above analysis would indicate a fairly positive perspective on China's engagement in Africa as it seeks to reconcile non-interference and the responsibilities of being a global power, a discussion of peace and security also necessitates assessing the impact of that very notion, such as the increasing supply of arms to Africa over the last decade. (In this domain China is not necessarily different from other great powers.) For example, between 2006 and 2010 China accounted for 25% of the volume of major arms supplied to Africa.[32] Of concern in a discussion about China's contribution to peace and security is the fact that many of these small arms have been key factors in the proliferation of violence on the continent in the years since the end of the Cold War. While trying to be a more assertive and responsible player on the continent, this reveals the complexity (and flipside) of China's involvement in peace and security in Africa.

CONCLUSION

China's foray into political matters is a consequence of the growing need for it to respond to attacks on its citizens and investments on the ground, but can also be traced to grander foreign policy underpinnings associated with its desire to position itself as a norms entrepreneur in the global arena. What emerges from the interplay between these two factors is a dynamic foreign policy that is responsive to the political contexts of African states while guarding the sanctity of state sovereignty. To be a successful player in promoting peace, security and human rights in Africa, China has found it necessary to develop an approach that mitigates the challenges of operating in volatile environments by increasing its engagements in multilateral organisations. In doing this, China positions itself as an important alternative to established global norms, projecting its aspirations of becoming a more responsible great power in world affairs.

ENDNOTES

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