

# Chinese involvement in peace and security in Africa and beyond

In 2012 at the inauguration of the new African Union (AU) headquarters, which was paid for and constructed entirely by China, *The Globe and Mail* commented that it represented the AU's responding to the demise of Moammar Gadhafi and "embracing its new ally, China." The article presented China as stepping in to fill a key role in providing the resources necessary to respond to the continent's security challenges, while at the same time implying that China represents a serious challenge to Western interests. That commentators question every move made by China on the African continent, especially Chinese involvement in African security affairs, is certainly not a new revelation. Research on Chinese involvement in African peace and security has been advanced from a wide range of frames, with perhaps three emerging as dominant.

First is a stream of literature that discusses differences in approaches to peace and security issues in Africa. This literature focuses on gaps or limitations to what are identified as Western or Chinese approaches to peace and security issues, attempting to define Chinese or Western approaches to peace and security, searching

for opportunities for trilateral cooperation, or discussing how to reconcile various approaches to African needs. One issue with this literature is that scholars often get bogged down in debates over the relative merits of different approaches. At the same time, African scholars have raised serious concerns that such conversations overemphasize the ideological divide between East and West and give far too little agency to African states. Chinese scholars have pointed out that concepts such as the "Angola model" or "Beijing consensus" were largely developed by non-Chinese academics, arguing instead that China often responds ad hoc to African security challenges, largely lacking a strategy.

Problematic for this research, particularly in China, is the lack of field research on peace and security issues by Chinese scholars. While the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and other actors are working to provide more opportunities for such research, very few Chinese academics are able to write about African peace and security issues or China's approach based on firsthand fieldwork. This perhaps

explains some of the limitations of this stream of literature.

Second is research on China's relationship with the African Union and African regional bodies, often in comparison to engagement with other regional bodies. As Nie Wenjuan recently pointed out, China's cooperation with the African Union in peace and security affairs has grown more quickly than that with the ASEAN Regional Forum, largely due to the former's much deeper involvement in security affairs. While China has been able to work closely with regional organizations to support solutions to security issues in Africa, it has been forced to innovate much more in Central Asia and Southeast Asia through the leadership role it plays in organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or platforms such as the Mekong Joint Patrols. Such research efforts are particularly significant given the high level of interest among regional and global bodies in engagement with China. This is, of course, not to say that China lacks institutional innovations in Africa. FOCAC is certainly one of its most successful multilateral platforms, and in and of itself warrants deeper research, particularly with respect to its nascent role on peace and security issues.

A third focus is on the bidirectional impacts of China's economic involvement across Africa on local and regional conflict dynamics. As a recent Saferworld report argues, China's involvement in hydropower development across Africa can be a source of conflict, particularly when there is no consensus among national publics or across countries regarding whether dams should

be constructed. Research in a similar vein has looked at China's role in constructing infrastructure in Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and its oil investments in the Sudan. An important finding of this research is that China's involvement as an investor, as a source of migration, or in building infrastructure is pushing it to become more deeply involved in peace and security issues, as well as generating tremendous pressures for change in Chinese foreign policies.

While it is generally accepted that China does have its political motivations for involvement in African peace and security affairs, particularly related to advancing or blocking various initiatives at the United Nations, this third body of literature is especially critical given the depth and rapid growth of China's economic involvement across Africa. Research at the nexus of China's economic and security involvement raises a number of key questions. First is how Chinese economic involvement is driving an evolution of Chinese foreign and domestic policies, particularly with respect to Chinese foreign policy principles. As China becomes deeply involved economically in places like the DRC or the Sudan, Chinese scholars such as Wang Yizhou have developed theories such as the theory of creative involvement to provide intellectual support for China to play a role in preventing conflict or mediating the outcomes of conflict in ways that protect its overseas interests. Such policy changes are essential, particularly when one considers that China has invested US\$1 billion or more in infrastructure projects in more than one dozen African countries. This offers a

compelling reason for deep Chinese involvement in African security issues and is one of the most frequently cited explanations for China's deepening involvement in UN and AU peacekeeping operations—without security and stability, it is not possible to move these projects forward.

At a more specific level, field research in Angola has generated arguments for a different interpretation of the Chinese principle of non-interference in domestic affairs to step away from the traditional emphasis on incumbent rulers. Jiang Heng, a researcher of the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation, has argued that by pursuing a strategy of engaging only with government and partnering only with government actors in implementing social projects and corporate social responsibility, Chinese state-owned enterprises and state officials supporting their efforts are regularly embroiled in conflict and are often manipulated by host governments to various political ends. As a preventative means, Jiang argues, Chinese companies must engage with a full array of actors, including opposition parties and even armed groups. While traditional interpretations of the principle of non-intervention focus on incumbent rulers, this view argues that Chinese actors actively seek dialogue and cooperation with non-state actors and even armed groups to prevent destabilizing a fragile peace.

There remains much space for further research on how Chinese economic involvement pushes China toward deeper involvement in peace and security issues

overseas, as this will likely be the most significant factor driving Chinese involvement. In dealing with these problems, though, one of the main obstacles remains the dearth of empirical research by scholars, particularly Chinese scholars, on African peace and security issues. While the development of area studies in China has accelerated over the past decade, the vast majority of scholars still focus their attention on great power politics, while few look at specific cases in Africa or beyond. Both Chinese and Western scholars have pointed out that it is often this lack of expertise in African peace and security that results in Chinese investors' making miscalculations in their overseas investments at great cost for local or even regional peace and stability.

This problem, though, is by no means specific to the China-Africa relationship, and this raises another question: are China-Africa studies the best frame for looking at China's role in overseas peace and security issues? The problems discussed above and interaction, especially between overseas Chinese economic interests and local conflict dynamics, are vastly similar when comparing cases like the DRC, Myanmar, or Kyrgyzstan. One question that should be raised is whether scholarship might focus more on China's relationship with least developed countries or fragile states more broadly. Especially for students of Chinese foreign policy, comparative study of China's experience in conflict hotspots across the globe might help answer a range of questions related to the development of Chinese diplomacy and help identify new approaches to building peace in fragile contexts.