

# The securitization of China's Africa relations

Adding “international,” “peace,” and “security” to “Africa” and “China” runs the distinct risk of rendering existing abstractions more abstract. However, given the known limitations of—but necessary recourse to—these continental and continental-like country categories, it is evident that the themes of peace and security warrant deeper treatment in a manner that is commensurate with the growing importance of these areas in their own right, and as interconnected with myriad aspects of China and Chinese relations in and beyond Africa. In sum, the securitization of China's Africa relations is a trend that has become more manifestly apparent and entwined, as it more consequentially is, in the deepening complexity and changing trajectory of the Chinese government's engagement and those of myriad other Chinese actors in the continent, becoming progressively more important as an area of research and policy engagement.

For at least a decade, and following a longer postcolonial history, there has been a not-insignificant intervening wall of reporting and representational practices about China in relation to African peace and security. This should not, as some do, be approached as *a*—or *the*—singular discourse, whether that of “the West,” “China,” or “Africa” (the

“China in Africa” discourse of the West; the “West in Africa” discourse of China; or “the China and the West in Africa” discourse of Africa). Instead, it should be approached as a more diverse, globalized, and multifaceted dynamic that has been and remains influential in framing issues to the extent that it can, in certain respects, be considered constitutive of relations. This is evident when, especially but not only, coupled with activism, it is influential in setting policy agendas.

A number of dominant tropes might be noted as part of a shift in popular representation that formerly had China as a driver of conflict in Africa as a default setting and, more recently, has augmented this to include interest in its conflict mediation and peace diplomacy. Indeed, there is an unmistakable shadow of the past in much of the more recent popular coverage of China's role in the continent in general, and in particular in relation to security matters, which even means some of the vocabulary and repertoires of symbols used to frame relations are remarkably similar to those catalyzed by Zhou Enlai's 1963–64 tour, when a martial language of war became common in Western reporting of “Red China in Africa,” accompanied by communist dragons. A martial language remains, but the dragons have different

incarnations today amidst signs of an emerging geopolitics of China's Africa relations that the 2014 U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit confirmed. Four of these more recent manifestations are worth briefly noting. First, the notion of China as a conflict driver predated but was confirmed—and visibly globalized—by Darfur, and tended to approach China in a particular way. Rather than inserting China into the quite developed literature on the political economy of conflict in Africa, China instead was often treated as different to the point of being unique. Analysis thus trained a spotlight on China and, in so doing, abstracted it from previously established political economy of conflict. The current analytical turn toward embedding China in a more realistic context of conflicts in many respects is overdue. To this tendency to represent and examine China as an isolated actor, downplaying important interrelations with a host of others, was added a further tendency to present China as a unitary actor. Second, then, China as a unitary actor was popular but problematic. From overstating the Chinese state as a unitary phenomenon, however, including oil corporations as an unproblematic part of China's foreign policy, analysis has since sought to overly disaggregate China: the movement has been, broadly, from overstating to understating the Chinese state. Third, a number of notions about China's "power" and political "leverage" in conflict settings are assumed or projected that are not helpful when squared with actual dynamics. These mostly failed to properly locate China in an appropriately complex manner. In other words, China as an analytical entry point into complex, historically produced conflict dynamics had

limited utility in view of the primacy of African dynamics.

Finally, for all the dynamism of local change and the constantly evolving nature of China-Africa ties in relation to conflict issues, and beyond, there remains a tendency toward static frames of debate, notably the tired theme of debates on the principle of non-interference. While understandable, this produces disconnects between the deceptive appearance of a broad continuity of engagement and a more dynamic changing set of practices and actual engagement concomitant with more diverse debates than are assumed by much of the external coverage. Attention to higher-order principles of Chinese foreign policy, while understandable and important in certain regards, detracted from the more interesting bottom-up processes of dynamic and grounded change, a kind of actually existing and actively adapting foreign policy incongruent with formal, Beijing-intoned Non-Interference.

Academic engagement with these themes has yet to supersede the work of more practitioner or activist constituencies. This provides a further example where the politics of knowledge has operated in a number of areas. These include, firstly, that of engaged international NGOs and other more activist constituencies seeking to advance policy agendas of various kinds on security and peace matters. Obvious examples like Darfur aside, these have also been connected with the aims and activities of donors seeking to add substance to the aspirational aims of undertaking trilateral cooperation with China in Africa. Second, the Chinese government has clearly

invested in promoting itself as a force for peace. Given that the previous monopoly on the commissioning of such knowledge production has been broken and China's growing financial support for various kinds of research, including on security and peace matters, the stage is set for further developments produced by a more plural system of research funding patronage. Finally, beyond this official track, a related aspect that should not be overlooked is the privatization of risk analysis about unstable, conflicted, affected Africa theaters for corporate purposes. As Chinese oil companies or China-Africa Development Fund engagements show, for example, there have been moves to commission risk analysis from leading risk consultancies or pursue local knowledge outreach for investment purposes. In this respect, it appears that such corporate entities have become more aware of and able to respond to new risks, and that the apparent lack of academic research involving longer-term immersion in conflict-affected parts of Africa has meant that it has lagged behind.

A number of related, broadly different areas and levels structure movements in the theme of China, Africa, and international peace and security. At the international systemic level, security and peace are bound up with China's relations with the hitherto Western-dominated system in general and the United States more particularly. China's participation in UN mechanisms, of which peacekeeping is the most photogenic, easily cited case of China's wider contribution to international peace and security, is a further dimension. Its less visible but notable participation in other bodies, like the Peacebuilding

Commission, is also worth considering, since the area of China's role in future peacebuilding is potentially significant. At the continental level, China's relations with regional organizations headed by, but not confined to, the AU has been a notable area of thickening connections in peace and security terms. As well as subregional engagements, there are also bilateral dimensions, often containing highly localized dynamics. This is, despite activity at the multilateral level, where the main thrust of China's engagement falls. It is where the continent of Africa emerges as unusually salient and potentially significant as an arena for foreign policy experimentation.

The very reality of such "complexity," seen in the DRC, Chad, or the Sudans, of an already changed and still very much changing engagement, is in itself important. For China, it lacks historical precedents, especially in regard to perhaps the most salient emerging theme: the changing nexus of economics and security relations. As such, there are compelling factors driving the Chinese government's engagement produced by heightened exposure to various risks, attendant and new vulnerabilities, and the multilevel and omnidirectional expectations flowing from perceptions about what China's role could and should be when its security role is seen as being less than commensurate with its economic and political stature. However, beyond necessity, and the flexible, adaptive responses flowing from this, there remains a sense of opportunism and opportunity in China's security outreach. That is, more than merely being reactive, one trend involves a more proactive, experimental

role, not merely in terms of hard security engagements but also in the ideas and norms concerning the peace question in Africa.

The main outward manifestation of the formal mainstreaming of security into relations can thus be seen in the way in which the subject has become more central to China's Africa engagement. China's permanent UN Security Council membership ensures that many of the issues and politics involved cannot be consigned to an already wide-ranging regional relation but assume an international dimension even as, increasingly, many of the issues concerning conflict have become more localized in tandem with deepening economic ties and the political and security exposure that this is producing. Beyond this important level, the most obvious elevation of security in relations, and one that goes beyond mere symbolism, is evident at the FOCAC level in the form of the new China-Africa security initiative announced at FOCAC V. However, beyond such official moves is an interesting, potentially fertile area of emerging engagement around more theoretically concerned debates concerning Chinese peace and security options in Africa.

The relatively small field of security—small insofar as it remains upstaged by other, more prominent areas of research and interest in the rapidly expanding (if still not well-defined) field of China-Africa relations—is important because it involves more than just a reactive critique of prevailing international peace/security engagement informed by, and organized

according to, broadly, liberal peace notions. It also involves a formative and evolving period characterized by efforts to define and assert norms. It is thus not simply the ambition to challenge prevailing norms and assert different, “Chinese” ones but also the efforts to do so that open up intriguing areas of conceptual and applied interest, which is unlikely not to be connected with more substantive future policy agendas and operations. While liberal peace precepts and policies have been questioned and undermined from within by sympathetic constituencies for some time, as part of an effort to enhance their general impact, only recently has there been the emergence of an alternative set of Chinese ideas and practical mechanisms that begin to pluralize the field in a limited fashion and within existing constraints. This is mostly not an overt set of contending concepts, much of it styled as complementary to broader international methods and goals, but such ideas as “creative involvement,” “responsible protection,” or the “development peace” indicate a mounting tide of contributions.

In conclusion, the securitization of China's Africa relations is a theme that stands ready to be explored at different levels, from more international treatments to responding to the need to engage in more detailed contextual studies of internationally mediated processes rooted in local conflict dynamics. This is where certain branches of IR theory might potentially be brought to bear on this field, although not in such a way that theorizing becomes a functional substitute for more ethnographically inclined field research that can inform such endeavors. In terms of recent IR “turns”—

toward the ethnographic, or “non-Western” theory, for example—such moves could actually reposition Africa—and, in turn, China—such that a reframed, more enhanced form of IR treatment could enable a more productive engagement in this field. One obvious entry point here is that of global political economy, which can go beyond the state centrality of much IR theory and better connect power, politics, and the economics of security. Another is the necessity of going beyond a narrow conception of security and into a broadened perspective—taking in everything from social dimensions to state and governance issues—better able to engage the wider spectrum of security and peace issues with which China is now more involved.

More readily, research that draws on different waves of the already developed and insightful literature on transnationalism and international intervention in conflict—as well as the realm of development aid—and some of the more recent work on “ungoverned spaces” or “areas of limited statehood” problematize such categories as state sovereignty that have been so prominent in China-Africa relations and discourses about it but fail to meaningfully extend beyond narrow statist conceptions into the politics of wider relations beyond many capital cities in African countries. Especially in conflict zones, extending analysis to a more diverse conception of global China made up of diverse actors, themselves interacting with diverse forms of local, regional, and national authority, as well as a host of assorted international actors co-present in such places as the DRC, South Sudan, or Somalia, would be productive and generate important insights.

Coupled with conversations and active connections with different research communities in parts of Africa and China, this could take research into terrain that is more recognizably part of changing China-Africa relations than standard mainstream representations.

A further issue is whether, and if so how, actual direct experience and the adaptive practices of different Chinese actors feed into the conceptual debates in China about how best to respond to African security challenges and do more than rhetorically intone the language of peace. The interrelationship between greater ideational engagement on peace and conflict questions and the changing trajectory of Chinese engagement in Africa is thus set to remain influential. It could be suggested that it is from the politics of security encounters—as initiated, negotiated, or encountered—that a more substantial, and theoretically informed, body of scholarship might emerge in the future, since this has substantive weight beyond what is or might be normatively desirable.

Finally, with China and beyond, there are also issues around the emergence of a broader cast of actors that suggest the growth of a more general, aggregate, South-South security dynamic in a comparatively early stage of grappling with security and peace issues. This is most obviously evident in the BRICS. The extent to which there can be such an engagement departing from previous such efforts with greater efficacy is very much in doubt. However, insofar as there are the apparent ambition and conviction in a slowly emerging, more

defined set of alternative modalities and guiding ideas, this is worth considering further. Doubtless, it can only reinvigorate post-liberal peace debates. More than simply being taken in this regard, however, there is a need for further conceptual work on this theme and, especially, ground-truthed research that can illuminate more about what is rather than what is supposed to be in China's engagement with security and peace. In this, more than privilege "China" or things Chinese, the key entry point for future research is and has to be African.