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SAFERWORLD BRIEFING



As the world order changes, rising powers like China are increasingly involved in countries where peace is fragile. This brings new responsibilities and policy choices for China, while it also means a new reality for Western donors and policy makers. These changes are affecting peace and stability in conflict-affected states. However, as Beijing's approach towards these countries evolves there is an unprecedented opportunity for China and the West to develop more complementary approaches in support of peace.



CHINA AND CONFLICT-AFFECTED STATES RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR BUILDING PEACE

This briefing highlights the implications for peace and stability of China's growing engagement in conflict-affected states. It is based on an in-depth Saferworld report of research in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Sudan and South Sudan. It sets out key findings, conclusions and recommendations for Chinese and the Western actors.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The world order is changing rapidly. The dominant role of Western actors in development assistance and conflict prevention is diminishing, while that of rising powers from Asia and elsewhere is growing – with China foremost among these new actors. As the West grapples with the consequences of these changes for international relations and foreign policy, China is coming to terms with its new-found influence and the responsibilities this brings.

“It’s like we operate in parallel universes: they do what they do, we do what we do.”

Western diplomat on relations with China in Sri Lanka – Colombo, June 2011

FINDINGS

A number of common findings emerge from Saferworld's research:

- China's increased engagement in conflict-affected states is driven by diverse factors, including the pursuit of natural resources; the control of supply lanes; the search for new markets to sustain domestic economic growth; and concerns over its territorial integrity and security.
- China's engagement is based on certain core principles of foreign policy, notably non-interference in other countries' political affairs, but these are often applied with a degree of pragmatism.
- China's priority is generally to maintain stable bilateral relations and it avoids overt engagement on conflict issues, except when vital interests are threatened. On occasions when China has applied constructive pressure on governments to pursue peaceful solutions, it has had a positive effect.
- In practice, the policy of non-interference often implies support for the incumbent regime and this can reinforce conflict dynamics, for example when the state has been party to the conflict or is perceived to marginalise particular groups.
- China tends to support a top-down model of stability, providing military assistance and arms to host governments. State sovereignty is regarded as sufficient to legitimise the receipt of Chinese arms in most cases, but this laissez-faire approach has sometimes exacerbated conflict and insecurity.
- State stability is the basis for advancing mutual economic interests. China adopts a commercial model of development: for example, it provides financial assistance for the construction of infrastructure by Chinese companies. This business-like approach to development often appears to yield quicker results than Western aid.
- China can be seen to provide a tangible peace dividend in some post-war contexts; however, if the benefits are not distributed equitably to different groups this may reinforce divisions and strengthen drivers of conflict.
- Western policies linking aid and other co-operation to government performance in areas such as governance or human rights will become harder to pursue since China's presence as an alternative financier and diplomatic ally weakens Western leverage.
- China's engagement on conflict-related issues in multilateral bodies remains firmly based on the principle of state sovereignty.
- There is little or no dialogue between Western and Chinese officials about engagement in conflict-affected states. As a consequence, external support is not as effective as it could or should be in supporting peace and stability.
- Competition for influence between China and India will have greater significance for peace and stability in some countries than the relationship between China and the West.



Sudanese oil workers operate a Chinese oil rig in Sudan. China has adopted a commercial model of development, providing financial assistance for infrastructure projects. © MICHAEL FREEMAN

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

China rising

- The role of China in conflict-affected states is increasingly apparent. China should recognise the impacts of its engagement upon internal dynamics, and acknowledge the responsibilities that come with its influential role.
- China should use its influence to promote sustainable and inclusive peace as well as stability, recognising that economic co-operation and other forms of assistance can exacerbate conflict if not sensitive to local dynamics.

Implications for the West

- Western commitments to key building blocks of sustainable peace, such as good governance and human rights, should not be sidelined in favour of geopolitical interests and competition with China.
- Western actors should seek to uphold these values by linking aid to diplomacy more effectively; ensuring greater coherence across the donor community; and supporting non-state actors to have a stronger voice in the development process.
- Polarisation of the West and China should be avoided, and opportunities sought to support confidence-building measures between rising powers, such as China and India.

Bridging the policy gap

- China and the West should build on their shared concern for stability in conflict-affected states as a basis for policy dialogue at both official and non-governmental levels.
- Policy communities in China and the West should question what is meant by stability and how this is applied; and advocate an approach that supports peacebuilding, rather than undermining it.
- China and the West should ensure that at the heart of any dialogue about conflict-affected states are the needs and concerns of local stakeholders, both state and non-state.

Building a culture of co-operation

- China is going through a period of policy development as it engages more on issues of peace and conflict. The West should take advantage of this opportunity to help shape China's approach in conflict-affected states.
- Western and Chinese actors should increase awareness and capacities to operate in a conflict-sensitive way. This applies to both bilateral assistance and private sector engagement.

An enabling international architecture

- Building peace and stability in conflict-affected states will require greater co-operation at the multilateral as well as bilateral level. New development frameworks and processes should reflect the increasingly global role of China and other rising powers.
- China should be encouraged to participate actively in developing and implementing international strategies and initiatives that will help prevent conflict, such as the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States and the UN Arms Trade Treaty.

“If a man is thirsty, he needs to drink, no matter where the water comes from. China is ready to do things straight away.[...] When the West gives some small money, they want to manage it very carefully. While they are thinking what to do, China will come in.”

GoSS official – Unity State, South Sudan, August 2011

A critical issue is what happens as China and other rising powers make their presence increasingly felt in countries where peace is precarious.



ABOUT SAFERWORLD

Saferworld is an independent international NGO. We work directly with local people, as well as governments and international organisations, to prevent violent conflict and encourage co-operative, people-centred approaches to peace and security. We believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

While we are not a traditional development agency, we seek to understand

and influence the relationship between conflict, security and international development.

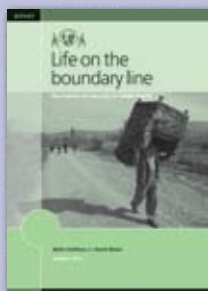
We work in over 15 countries in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. We have staff based in Bangladesh, Kenya, Kosovo, Nepal, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan and Uganda, as well as in London, Brussels and Vienna.

All our publications are available to download from our website.

FRONT COVER: The Chinese contingent of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) during a medal ceremony held in the Liberian capital, Monrovia.

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BACK COVER: © TOM VAN CAKENBERGHE



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