
Seminar report



Tackling insecurity in the Horn of Africa: China's role

Nairobi, 11-12 January 2012

Summary

Over two days in January 2012, Saferworld and the Africa Peace Forum (APFO) brought together a group of 23 experts from universities, think-tanks, NGOs and other organisations to deliberate on how China can best contribute to international efforts to support long-term peace and security in the Horn of Africa region. The seminar was held under Chatham House rules: this report does not directly represent the opinions and views of any individual participants or organisations. Instead, it is an attempt to summarise and reflect broad areas of consensus.

A number of regional, thematic and country-specific topics were examined in open and frank discussion, helping to deepen understanding of the dynamics that drive insecurity in the region, the principles that guide China's policy responses and the challenges it faces in implementing them in the Horn. The discussion also provided the background context for more focused working-group sessions that identified four specific policy recommendations for the Chinese Government:

1. **Enhance efforts to work through existing regional organisations, mechanisms and initiatives**
2. **Assist with the creation of an effective security sector in Somalia**
3. **Provide development assistance to South Sudan that is co-ordinated and conflict-sensitive**
4. **Pro-actively build confidence between Khartoum and Juba**

Regional overview

- A myriad of complex and inter-related factors drive insecurity in the region at the local, national and regional levels. While domestic factors explain many civil wars, inter-state tensions (for example, between Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia) are a crucial element in the region's security landscape. The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in the Horn is an important driver of conflict.
- The African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) are the primary actors in the region's security architecture. The AU's Peace and Security Council (PSC) is the most important institution. The AU is also represented in the region by AU peacekeepers in Somalia and Sudan, the Panel of the Wise (which acts in conflict mediation) and the intended Africa Standby Force. IGAD has set up institutions such as the Conflict Early Warning and Response Network (CEWARN), while also playing a role in mediation. Regional efforts have been made to combat the SALW problem, for example by the Regional Centre on Small Arms (RECSA).
- A number of international actors, including several Western states, have for a long time played a role in the region's security landscape. Reactions to their current and continued presence have been mixed, especially as their interests not always perceived to be in line with those of the region's people.
- It must be accepted that the externalisation of the region's security problems – for example, through demanding that Western states or China 'do more' – raises the danger of overlooking real, local, and sustainable solutions, many of which are beyond the

international community's control. In this regard, China cannot be seen as the region's 'saviour'. Furthermore, as with all other states, China will often prioritise its own interests.

- China's relations with the different states in the Horn vary substantially in history, depth and interests. Although China seeks to maintain good relations with all of them, this is becoming harder; internal and inter-state politics may force China to take sides. Equally varied are the reactions of the region's policy community to China's growing role, which range from the critical and suspicious, to the eagerly welcoming. Low levels of technological transfer and the absence of common African strategic priorities vis-à-vis China are seen as problems.

***Policy Recommendation One:
Enhance efforts to work through
existing regional organisations,
mechanisms and initiatives***

Where possible, Chinese technical and financial support to address security-related issues **should be channelled through existing AU and IGAD** structures and mechanisms. This will help prevent further fragmentation of the international community's engagement in the region. To promote greater harmonisation between international and regional actors, Chinese support will have to be as transparent as possible. In these efforts, identifying and understanding the limitations and actual needs of regional organisations will be important.

China should **support regional security initiatives**, for example, by providing resources and technical expertise to help RECSA combat the proliferation of SALW. This could be focused on stockpile management, marking and record-keeping and the destruction of illegal weapons and unexploded ordinances.

- China is increasingly concerned about peace and security in the Horn: it no longer wants to remain on the sidelines. The safety of growing numbers of Chinese nationals in the region is a high priority – in Ethiopia and Sudan, for example, armed attacks on oil fields have resulted in Chinese fatalities. The protection of Chinese commercial and economic interests is also important. Issues like drought, terrorism, border clashes and crime are a growing concern to the Chinese Government; piracy is a clear example where insecurity has forced Beijing to actively respond. The question for Chinese policy makers is not *if* China should help – but *how* it can.

Thematic issues

- African states have agreed in the AU Charter that the protection of civilians can trump state sovereignty: humanitarian intervention is not a purely 'Western' concept. While external intervention in domestic conflicts can be highly controversial, it is equally questionable for a government to do nothing when crimes against humanity are being committed.
- China's policy of non-interference and its prioritisation of state sovereignty are important guiding principles. The Chinese Government will actively engage on an internal conflict only if it threatens regional stability, and if China has the consent of the host country, relevant regional organisations and the United Nations (UN). Some in the region's policy community believe that China's policy of non-interference is used to justify what is essentially a policy of indifference.
- However, due to China's desire to contribute to peace, its deepening interests in the region (such as the safety of Chinese nationals), amongst other factors (such as regional countries' demands for assistance), the non-interference policy is changing – albeit in a gradual and cautious way. Some in the Chinese policy community are broaching new approaches, such as "creative involvement" or "constructive engagement", and calling for the Government to take more initiative in helping solve problems. Nonetheless, China faces a dilemma: while some are asking it to do more to address conflict issues, others may regard a more pro-active China with suspicion.
- A distinction must be made between calling for China to engage more actively, and calling for China 'to interfere'. China is not being asked to adopt a 'policy of intervention', but simply to provide more assistance to tackle insecurity. This does not mean China must militarily intervene in a unilateral way or, for that matter, to utilise military tools. Instead, China could for example play a bigger role in mediation, provide training to police or work to address root causes of conflict such as food insecurity.
- China's contribution to UN peacekeeping operations in the Horn aims to lay the foundations upon which local actors can build long-lasting peace. China faces some big decisions over the future of these contributions on how it can play a larger role in new areas (for example, in peacebuilding), how it can help improve operational effectiveness (for example, in better linking peacekeeping and peacebuilding), and whether it should join new missions (for example, in Somalia). China has the potential to play a bigger role in peacekeeping operations in the Horn. This

expanded role is contingent upon formal requests from the UN Security Council (UNSC), the AU and regional countries.

- Although the region's states hold some responsibility, China must think more carefully about where the weapons it exports to the region end up and how they are sometimes misused. However, different sets of actors in China have different interests, and some are more influential than others. This can prevent progress in this area.
- China is providing more aid to the region, but it is still learning how to make this more effective. China does not see itself as a 'donor' in Western terms; instead it seeks 'common development'. There are internal debates in China about the principles that underpin its aid. This includes discussion on ways to make Chinese aid more responsible (to international norms and Chinese taxpayers), whether to start attaching some practical conditions to this end, and on whether China should cooperate more with Western donors or continue to follow its own unique path.
- Debates on actual needs and aid effectiveness in the region must involve civil society – largely side-lined in China-Horn of Africa relations so far. Through monitoring, raising awareness, advising and lobbying, civil society plays a role in ensuring governments do not simply act – or remain passive – in their own self-interest. Greater person-to-person contact is also desired: Chinese diplomats could learn more about the region, and better explain China's policies, through being more open to interaction with local NGOs, journalists, academics and other civil society actors.
- Chinese actors operating in the region are numerous, and often have different objectives and agendas; their actions are not necessarily the emanation of Chinese Government's policies. There is a need, in speaking of discussing China-Horn of Africa relations, to distinguish amongst Chinese actors, and to extend engagement to all.

Somalia

- Having lacked a functioning state for 20 years, Somalia has faced protracted insecurity and human suffering. Various manifestations of armed conflict are occurring in Somalia: civil war, foreign interventions, regional proxy wars, communal clashes, clashes between paramilitaries, piracy, Islamist movements and armed criminality.
- The absence of a functioning state has brought the international community into a key supplanting role. However, external efforts at

peacebuilding have been largely ineffective, often failing to address the internationalised dimensions of the conflict, or concentrating on state revival at the expense of the critical issues at the root of insecurity. The absence of agreed common ground between external actors is a real problem. It has meant that consistent, concerted and co-ordinated action has often been lacking.

Policy Recommendation Two: Assist with the creation of an effective security sector in Somalia

China now has relatively established experience in **providing training** for police and peacekeepers, and could extend this to Somalia, complimented with sustainable levels of **financial support** for security forces. However, before delivering assistance, Chinese officials **first need to develop a much deeper understanding of the context**.

International assistance to Somali security actors has thus far proved problematic. China **must be careful not to replicate past mistakes**, especially by ensuring that the timing is appropriate. Consultation should be taken with a broad range of actors in Somalia, including existing civil society platforms, alongside dialogue with regional states, organisations and other international actors.

It is vital that China **pro-actively co-ordinates and harmonises with all other actors providing similar security-sector assistance**, including regional actors, the United States (US), the European Union (EU), and European countries. The UN can play an important role in co-ordinating assistance. Ideally, **training should take place inside Somalia in selected 'safe zones'**.

- The creation of an effective security sector in Somalia is crucial, but has so far proved extremely challenging. Firstly, there is little of a security sector to support in the first place. Secondly, clan rivalries mean that capacity building and training quickly come undone: fighters often change sides. The unco-ordinated approaches of Western states and regional countries exacerbates these problems. Lastly, the flow of arms into and around Somalia fuels conflict and makes establishing authority difficult.
- In general, Chinese expertise and knowledge on Somalia is relatively low. However, some of the manifestations of insecurity, such as piracy or terrorism, are considered real threats to Chinese interests, leading to a search for deeper analysis and understanding. More broadly,

China cannot ignore Somalia's situation as it develops its wider relationship with Africa.

- China understands the solution to Somalia's problems to be internal, and therefore supports dialogue processes, while providing food aid and financial assistance to the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). For now, Chinese military engagement in Somalia is very unlikely. Instead, China fully supports on-going AU peacekeeping efforts, and will, in the near future, be discussing further Somalia's security concerns with the AU. China also seeks a larger role for the UN, with more discussion at the UNSC level required.
- Current anti-piracy operations are not sustainable: the root causes of piracy must be addressed. Furthermore, the international community – including China – must recognise that illegal fishing and dumping in Somalia's waters is a violation of international law, and act accordingly.

South Sudan

- The absence of security for South Sudan's people is the biggest post-independence disappointment. There has been no peace dividend, and the new state continues to face deep insecurity. This insecurity stems from local conflict dynamics (for example, cattle rustling or clashing militias), the failure of the state to provide security (for example, an inadequate police force, and the reality that security forces are often the very source of insecurity), the proliferation of SALW, and continued inter-state tensions with Sudan.
- Regional states, the AU and IGAD have all played varied roles in South Sudan and Sudan, including pushing for the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), and mediating on-going disputes. International actors, especially the UN and several Western states, have also attempted to address insecurity, often through applying significant diplomatic pressure, while at the same time providing large amounts of development and humanitarian aid.
- To a degree, China's image in South Sudan is negatively tainted by both its past history of support for Khartoum and its continuing lack of transparency as to its intentions. It is recognised, however, that China has understood and pragmatically reacted to changing realities and the new-found independence of South Sudan.

Policy Recommendation Three: Provide development assistance to South Sudan that is co-ordinated and conflict-sensitive

China can contribute to longer-term peace in South Sudan through its aid and economic cooperation, especially with regards to much-needed infrastructure construction in the transport, energy and health sectors. However, **better ways to share information between China and other international development partners should be found** in order to enhance efforts to implement the South Sudan Development Plan that the Government has agreed.

Learning from past mistakes in Sudan, the Chinese Government should seek to **make all of China's aid and economic cooperation more conflict-sensitive**. This will require various Chinese actors (including, for example, MOFCOM officials, feasibility analysts, project delivery companies, and other commercial actors) to work more closely to **better understand local conflict dynamics**. To do this, they should carry out consultations with local communities and civil society groups, local government and the GoSS in order to ensure their engagement does not inadvertently worsen conflict.

The Chinese Government should encourage and incentivise Chinese companies constructing Chinese-funded infrastructure projects in South Sudan to **actively provide employment and training for local youth**. Companies should seek to use Chinese workers in a transitional manner. As part of their corporate social responsibility commitments, Chinese firms operating in South Sudan should be encouraged to help provide training centres, education and recreational facilities for young people. The Chinese Government could also forge partnerships in education (for example, through sending teachers to work and train in locally-owned projects).

- The Government of South Sudan (GoSS) also recognises that South Sudan and China are well matched to partner in pragmatic ways: China needs oil from the new country; South Sudan, in turn, is in need of critical infrastructure, which China is in a good position to provide. However, expectations – both in and outside South Sudan – that China will play *the* central role in providing development assistance are overly ambitious.
- GoSS officials have made it very clear that they wish to receive Chinese development assistance in the form of completed turn-key

projects, constructed by Chinese contractors, rather than financial loans or grants. This opens the prospect for some sort of resources-for-infrastructure deal between Beijing and Juba. Pervasive insecurity is a fairly significant obstacle to this, however: Chinese officials have expressed concerns about the dangers posed to Chinese companies carrying out infrastructure projects in South Sudan.

- Chinese companies are major consumers of, and investors in, Sudanese and South Sudanese oil. While oil holds the two countries together and creates incentives for cooperation, it is also a disputed issue that drives conflict. Local and regional observers suggest there is a strategic opportunity here to forge a tripartite relationship to address outstanding disputes. China recognises that it can play an important role in balancing disputes between the two, and has already encouraged both sides to partake in dialogue and AU-led initiatives.
- In many ways, there has been a remarkable change in the Chinese Government's engagement in Sudan and South Sudan over the past six years. More than ever before, it has been drawn in as a broker on conflicts: from being absent from the CPA to being its *de facto* guarantor; and in its role during the Darfur crisis. Chinese officials and policy makers now demonstrate a much deeper knowledge of the context than before.
- There remain clear instances where China can do more. On conflict and the humanitarian crisis in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile states, China has done very little to actively promote a political resolution, even though these new wars have deep potential consequences for South Sudan and the region more generally. In this respect, its engagement on conflict issues remains limited.
- Expectations will have to be tempered. China faces serious challenges ahead – not only in balancing relations between Juba and Khartoum, but also in how it will deal with continued instability, or even regime change. Domestic factors in both Juba and Khartoum will ultimately determine the parameters and extent of China's involvement.
- The continued flow of Chinese weapons into the wrong hands (for example amongst rebel groups fighting the GoSS) is also a serious issue. While it is recognised that the Chinese Government does not intend for its arms to end up in the hands of non-state actors, it must take more responsibility to address this if its image is to be improved.
- There are concerns that tensions between Sudan and South Sudan will be worsened by

China-US geopolitical competition. On the other hand, there are few other international security issues that present such obvious incentives and tangible benefits for China-US cooperation. In fact, the US and China were engaged in very detailed discussions running up to the independence of the South, suggesting that a precedent for cooperation exists.

Policy Recommendation Four: Pro-actively build confidence between Khartoum and Juba

The Chinese Government is in a position to **act as a broker of confidence between Juba and Khartoum** to promote progress on outstanding issues left unresolved from the CPA. While a long-term solution will need to be found by local parties, China can create sustainable channels for dialogue and help identify immediate measures to defuse hot-issues, especially those related to Abyei and oil revenue sharing.

The Chinese Government must **convince all parties that it is a neutral broker**. In South Sudan it could, for example, publically acknowledge that its image is tainted in the South and encourage compensation for communities whose rights were negatively affected by oil contracts during the war period (as is agreed in the CPA).

Over the longer term, the Chinese Government could consider ways to use various dimensions of China's relations with both parties (for example, in the commercial field) to **create incentives for South Sudanese and Sudanese actors to come together**. This, paired with China's neutrality, should be a core principle guiding its engagement.

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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 over 80 staff, based in Bangladesh, Kenya, Kosovo, Nepal, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan and Uganda, as well as in London, Brussels and Vienna. Our funding for 2010-2011 was around £6.8 million – mainly in the form of government grants from Canada, Denmark, the EU, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the UK.

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About Africa Peace Forum

Africa Peace Forum (APFO) is an independent, not-for-profit non-governmental organization registered in and based in Nairobi, Kenya. It facilitates research and advocacy on areas of peace and security at national, regional and international level.

APFO was established in 1994 to contribute to the effective management of conflicts and the promotion of peace and security in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region (this included Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Uganda, Somalia, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo).

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