

China's role in the mediation and resolution of conflict in Africa

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Meaningful participation in African conflict-resolution processes is not an important aspect of China's current Africa relations. China is becoming increasingly important in the landscape of African politics, including in conflict-affected theatres, but is not as significant an actor as external perceptions contend. Nor has the Chinese government shown any particular inclination for more active engagement beyond spheres such as Sudan where the need is more compelling. This paper offers a short assessment of China's role in the mediation and resolution of conflict in Africa, with Darfur used as a key example – in many ways forming the exception to the wider rule.

China's distinctive approach

China's principle of political equality and 'no-strings attached' approach are presented – and received by African governments – in favourable contrast to the more forceful conditionality of the West. Through a discourse of 'partnership' and 'cooperation' that informs its political identity and operating methods, China emphasises mutual benefit in its relations with Africa. China references its unique historical record, with an absence of colonial links, and future ties are presented as 'win-win cooperation'.

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As China operates bilaterally with incumbent governments as the primary channel for promoting its interests, its ability to engage non-state parties easily is limited. This bilateral stance and reluctance to integrate fully into multilateral donor forums in Africa is a strong competitive advantage, and China's participation in multilateral forums in Africa has thus been limited and context specific. In practice, beyond the UN Security Council, China is mostly positioned outside the mainstream multilateral architecture of crisis response, which Beijing regards as holding primary responsibility for peace and security management. One exception involving greater multilateral involvement is the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where China has been a member of the International Committee Supporting the Transition through its position on the UN Security Council and an energetic Chinese ambassador.

China's political influence in Africa is frequently overstated. External perceptions of a highly coordinated African strategy do not square with the nature of central Chinese policy making and tensions between central state goals and the increasingly diverse, multi-tiered Chinese engagement in Africa. The Chinese government's principled aversion to becoming meaningfully involved in domestic politics remains important. Alongside the continuity of its principles

for engaging Africa over the past fifty years, however, Beijing has also shown a consistent willingness for flexibility and has made tactical adjustments where required.

China's attitude to conflict resolution in Africa reflects contrasting policy priorities and economic interests. China remains a developing power more willing and able to talk peace than to participate substantively in such processes in Africa. In part this reflects a dearth of experience in applied conflict resolution in Africa. More importantly, it demonstrates China's primary interest in engaging on its own terms for its own ends. This interest is complicated by Africa's wider foreign relations, which feature continuing efforts to promote a fuller incorporation of China into multilateral forums and governing norms and values. How far China will go along with these, or will seek to play its own role, remains to be seen; but for the moment China appears intent on pursuing its own objectives.

China's relation to armed conflicts in Africa

Peace is a prominent, core feature in China's official presentation of its purpose in international affairs and Africa. Beijing is officially committed to supporting the existing security-related architecture in Africa. It places particular importance on the African Union (AU) and African regional organisations, as well as the UN Security Council. The importance of peace and resolving conflict is regularly invoked by Beijing, but this is not a significant or direct aspect of Chinese engagement. China's Africa Policy (2006), for example, devotes just one paragraph to this area. Likewise, the humanitarian assistance China has provided, mostly in kind, is minor in comparison to its other investments. Beijing has, however, taken on a more active role in African operations of UN peacekeeping, mainly in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia and Sudan.

The instances in which China has actively and substantively responded to conflict through mediation or conflict-resolution efforts are few. The Chinese government operates a secondary support role premised on the principle of assistance within its own capability as a developing country acting within its current means but one that will play an increasingly important role as it develops further. Efforts are channelled through involved governments and/or through support to the African Union (AU). Examples include a Chinese government donation of \$300,000 to the Kenyan Red Cross in January 2008 for support to post-election programmes, or its donation of \$300,000 to the AU to assist with peacekeeping in Somalia in August 2007. The Chinese government has not proactively sought to involve itself in peace processes; rather, it has affirmed the primary responsibility of the international community and engaged as and when its interests have been threatened.

The geography of Chinese engagement in Africa, and concentration of investment in resource-rich states – many prone to or characterised by armed conflict – has meant that its resource-extraction operations have become intertwined in existing conflict theatres. Chinese companies in places are reinforcing pre-existing, resource-related conflict dynamics. As such, they broadly

follow in the footsteps of other external actors and in turn are subject to the same operating constraints and challenges. For example, China's recent entry into the Nigerian oil sector has involved Chinese companies becoming caught up in conflict between the Nigerian state and militias.

Close association with African ruling elites poses challenges for China at times of regime transition. Beijing distanced itself from Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe due to the negative impact on its investments, the destabilising effect on the wider Southern African Development Community (SADC) region and outcry over arms sales. However, current Chinese engagement related to conflict is arguably most consequential in post-conflict settings, where China has brought investment and effective infrastructural delivery and thus increased visible peace dividends in places such as Sierra Leone, Liberia and Angola.

China's mixed role in Sudan

The popular notion that China represents the best route to peace in Darfur is, at best, abstract. Sudanese politics have been and remain central in the conflict, including the violent relation between the central governing apparatus and its peripheries as well as regional dynamics featuring a proxy war between Khartoum and Ndjamena. The ruling National Congress Party (NCP) under President Bashir has derived substantial benefit from China's support since the early 1990s.

China's position as dominant economic partner and key international political patron renders its influence on ruling circles in Khartoum potentially significant. The NCP has been ambivalent about its China policy and, wary of over-dependence on China, has sought to limit China's influence while also pursuing the normalisation of relations with America. Overall, China is far more important to Sudan than vice versa, and a degree of influence on the NCP has been demonstrated, notably in its acceptance of the United Nations/African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID). However, China's own desire for firmer leverage has yet to be demonstrated.

China's diplomatic approach has evolved to become more engaged in efforts to resolve conflict in Darfur, driven by a combination of pressure from inside and outside Sudan. It now has developed interests in Sudan. Since August 2006, China has sought to expand oil investment in Chad. Facing a drawn-out conflict amid the new regional geography of interests and the ongoing North–South peace process, China has also had to grapple with the unintended consequences of its role, including arms transfers and support for Khartoum and more recently Ndjamena. International pressure has taken the form of strong US diplomacy, divestment and advocacy campaigns mobilising a 'genocide Olympics', which appears to have had a limited impact on galvanising engagement.

China's self-interest has also moved its attempts to further stability through political settlement on Darfur. At the same time as changing its diplomatic role, China's expanding economic ties belie the notion of a 'shift' in Chinese engagement. China's aid programme to Darfur is a hybrid

combination of humanitarian assistance and assistance for recovery/development stepped up in 2007. It is notable that this is rationalised by an argument that dovetails with China's own role while also having some credibility in terms of the conflict dynamics – namely that underdevelopment fuels conflict, and economic development is necessary to a lasting peace.

Chinese diplomatic engagement has involved inter-related strands. Financial support for African Union peacekeepers in Darfur from 2004 eventually progressed into support for the UN/AU force from 2007. China now firmly supports an effective UNAMID deployment in Darfur and has pledged 315 troops to the mission. However, in enabling UNAMID, China's diplomacy supported Khartoum. China's former insistence on Khartoum's consent to a peacekeeping force evolved into attempts to persuade President Bashir to accept the proposed hybrid force. According to special envoy Ambassador Liu Guijin, China 'tried every means' and played 'a positive and constructive role' in encouraging the Sudan government's 'flexibility' in meeting the demands of the international community.

China's position is that it used its constructive, positive influence, but not pressure, in getting Khartoum to accept UNAMID. 'Constructive pressure' appears to have been an oxymoron for private arm-twisting. China has also increased aid to promote hearts-and-minds objectives, and expressed concern about civilian suffering. Such involvement is not conflict resolution, but in practice amounts to establishing the framework for enhancing political process.

China has engaged in limited mediation on an informal, ad hoc basis. China's Permanent Representative to the UN, Ambassador Wang Guangya played a notable off-stage role during negotiations between the Sudanese government and rebels on the Annan Plan for deployment of peacekeeping forces in Addis Ababa in November 2006. This example of Chinese involvement was arguably ad hoc and case-specific. It did not lead to further mediation, nor was it cited as part of a commitment to active conflict mediation. It was mainly the result of the Ambassador's personal initiative and ability. His brokering efforts were seen as effective (at the time, at least) and were praised as such by the US.

More generally, the appointment of Ambassador Liu Guijin as a special envoy for Darfur in May 2007 created a focal point for Chinese participation and public-relations strategy. With the appointment of the special envoy, Beijing has become a more active participant in international meetings on Darfur. Ambassador Liu Guijin attended negotiations in Sirte, Libya, in October 2007 for example, but only as an observer, and as a gesture of support. China made a donation of US\$500,000 in March 2008 to the Trust Fund for the AU–UN Joint Mediation Support Team for Darfur. China now appears more willing to participate than previously, although the question remains about how far it is willing and able to do so as more than an observer. China supports political process on Darfur but appears more comfortable in a support capacity as opposed to a direct role, and to prefer the tripartite mechanism.

China remains compromised by close association with the main conflict protagonist, the NCP. Beijing exhorts other external powers to exert pressure on Darfuri rebels to negotiate, while claiming credit for having influenced the Sudanese government on UNAMID. Beijing continues to object to robust pressure against the NCP, such as sanctions or tightened arms embargo, but lacks effective leverage over key conflict parties who denounce Chinese support for their enemies. Anti-China statements by the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), both of whose leaders have criticised China's support to the NCP, have been backed up by military attacks on oil facilities in Southern Sudan in which China has significant stakes. A gambit to pressure the NCP, this is also effective in drawing international attention. Rebel elements have privately expressed an interest in engaging China, but the upshot of China's partisan position as key patron of the NCP – in the view of conflict actors in Darfur and also in wider popular perception – further constrains China's potential leverage on other conflict parties.

China could assume potentially fruitful leadership on a concerted international coalition on Darfur, but it is most doubtful that China would want to do so. Underpinned by its own diplomatic imperatives, its engagement rests upon the existing Darfur Peace Agreement of May 2006, and support to the AU, UN and Sudanese government. While China has also engaged on the North–South peace, it did not play a significant role in peace negotiations in Sudan that produced the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of January 2005. The suggestion that China might play a role in mediating the Abyei boundary dispute remained unfulfilled. Arguably, given the current escalated fighting in Darfur, more robust Chinese support on implementation of the CPA would bring greater potential efficacy, as it remains the centre of political gravity in Sudan and crucial to the future of peace.

Prospects for greater engagement

Darfur is unique in terms of China's broader engagement in the continent: Sudan is a prominent, politicised case, and China's third-largest trade partner in Africa. China has not been so politically involved in other ongoing peace initiatives or African conflict zones, including in West Africa or the Central African Republic. Nor has it shown any strong interest in being involved beyond supporting the AU. In early 2008, for example, not long after a Khartoum-backed rebel attack aiming to overthrow President Deby of Chad, Ambassador Liu Guijin was careful to insist that China would not become involved in mediating proxy conflict between Khartoum and Ndjamená, although he urged both parties engaged in proxy war to practice 'good neighbourliness'.

To date, and with the exception of its political and limited financial support to the AU, Beijing has not shown more than a rhetorical willingness to support peace initiatives in Africa. Where there are particular and pressing reasons to become involved, however, Beijing has shown a willingness to do so, though this has tended to depend on context and circumstance more than general policy. This reflects a lack of direct experience of involvement in such initiatives coupled with ambivalence toward involvement in open-ended processes of conflict resolution. Most importantly, this is a relatively early stage for China's role in Africa.

China's African relations are becoming more complex, and China appears set to develop as a more established actor throughout the continent over the medium-to-long term. This has implications for security issues in general, and conflict resolution in particular. The logic of deepening commercial involvement suggests greater pressure for a stronger political relation, including investment protection. Furthermore, whether or not Beijing seeks further engagement, China's visibility and assumed influence renders Chinese actors vulnerable to being targeted by political and armed conflict parties seeking leverage mechanisms. The pressure this places on China's security agenda is one reason why Beijing is likely at least to consider becoming more active beyond peacekeeping. The killing of nine Chinese oil workers in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia in April 2007 was a wake-up call resulting in demands for greater protection of Chinese nationals in Africa. The Chinese government's reasons for being interested in conflict resolution and peace-related activities are likely to grow.

The compatibility of non-interference with the defence of national interests, and whether non-interference can continue to be preached and practised indefinitely, are open questions. For now, China's commitment to non-interference remains a comparative advantage in Africa and is unlikely to change over the medium term. It thus remains an inbuilt barrier to engaging more robustly in political processes, unless these proceed unofficially, in off-stage mediation or through the AU and a given African government and the UN Security Council. Indeed, Sudan might be said to be the exception confirming this wider scenario. However, this area is likely to be increasingly significant for China in the medium-to-long term, to the extent that China may need to be factored into a modified architecture of crisis response in Africa.

Sudan is a notable, if mixed, case of engagement that is stretching the boundaries of Chinese diplomatic practice. If Darfur were not such a controversial political issue and Sudan a top economic partner for China, however, it is most unlikely that China would have had the same degree of involvement. At this stage it is too optimistic to suggest that a precedent is being created on Darfur that might feed into other conflict-resolution processes. While Sudan represents a sea change in China's stance on interference, such diplomatic innovation is different from a developed role in conflict resolution. Beyond Sudan, the potential for Chinese influence in informal settings remains, albeit within a thick political milieu, and the non-public diplomacy usually preferred might conceivably be utilised for positive outcomes. As seen in Liberia, China's peacekeeping role might itself be a prelude to a growing multilateral role in conflict responses that might extend to participation in conflict resolution.

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