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Chinese Diplomacy in Africa: Constructing the Security-Development Nexus

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ILARIA CARROZZA, APR 7 2019

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This chapter argues for a re-examination of common theoretical approaches to China's socialisation in international relations. I first introduce the debate over China's rise and argue that studies of the country's foreign policy have failed to account for a number of important elements. The literature on socialisation has done a great deal in trying to compensate for such shortcomings. However, whilst I acknowledge the merits of such literature, I also find it problematic for two main reasons: first, the literature on normative change is biased in favour of a Western liberal order. Second, the same literature often neglects that China is both the *object* and *subject* of socialisation dynamics, for instance via the re-articulation of concepts of state sovereignty and intervention. I elaborate on the second problem by looking at China's regional forum diplomacy in Africa, focusing on the construction of security narratives via the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). I argue that China's FOCAC diplomacy is based on a discourse that frames China and Africa as friends and allies in the common struggle against Western hegemony. Chinese decision makers have been able to successfully socialise African leaders into a narrative of South-South cooperation that calls for increased cooperation and legitimises the security-development nexus which is at the heart of Chinese policies. It is by successfully interpellating African decision makers into this discourse that Beijing officials have justified increased 'interventions' in peace and security.

Socialising China

In a 1999 essay, Segal famously argued that China was overrated as both a power and a market, and that it had repeatedly failed to deliver on what had been promised by its leaders. After analysing to what extent China did or did not matter economically, militarily, and politically, he concluded that it was 'merely a middle power' (Segal 1999, 35). Many scholars after him have either supported or questioned his claim through more detailed empirical studies, and some of these have subsequently translated into debates within the international relations (IR) discipline on whether China is to be classified as a revisionist or a status quo power.[1] China's rise has thus been addressed from a range of perspectives, including realist, liberal, and foreign policy analysis approaches to its position in international politics: Some scholars have argued against a peaceful rise (Mearsheimer 2006; Mearsheimer 2014; Shih 2005); others have been more sceptical as to the country's potential to become a great power (Shambaugh 2013); yet other scholars have taken China's rise as given and explored the ways in which it could unfold (Buzan 2010; Buzan and Foot 2004; Christensen 2011; Xia 2001).

Indeed, the question of whether China matters is an important one. Nonetheless, I believe the approaches above to be limited in their description of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) foreign policy as if it was a monolith. To be sure, understanding the country's foreign policy is no easy task. As Shambaugh maintains, unlike many Western polities that have generally evolved within a singular liberal paradigm, the modern Chinese state has undergone several macro transitions – from the imperial phase, to republican, revolutionary communist, and modernising socialist (Shambaugh 2000). Despite their different scopes, goals, and tools, these different states have had three enduring missions: the modernisation of the economy, the transformation of society, and the defence of the nation

Chinese Diplomacy in Africa: Constructing the Security-Development Nexus

Written by Ilaria Carrozza

against foreign aggression. While some elements of the past have survived, each new system further elaborated them into new institutional frameworks – although marked by sharp departures, none of these states were ever totally new.

Yet, despite foreign and defence policies remaining fairly consistent and in line with the country's domestic priorities in the last three decades, the government has never disclosed any clear document outlining its strategic goals or grand strategy (Wang 2011).[2] Again, foreign policy scholars have tried to provide as accurate descriptions of these processes as possible (Gittings 2008; Wang 1994; Wang 2011). Similar to the studies mentioned above, these also fail to account for the interactions between the Chinese and other actors, decision makers' learning processes, and socialisation dynamics.[3] Approaches to Chinese foreign policy, argues Johnston, provide a limited understanding of the country's involvement in international institutions and normative regimes (Johnston 2008). Instead, he suggests that the PRC has increasingly shown a greater level of integration and cooperation within the international arena (Johnston 2003; Johnston 2013) – which also led him to argue that 'Chinese diplomacy since the 1990s [has been] more status quo-oriented than at any period since 1949 (Johnston 2008, 207). This is because Chinese decision makers have started to acknowledge the positive impact of global economic and information integration on the country's own economic development. Globalisation and multilateralism have thus become part of a 'new identity discourse that describes China as a "responsible major power", a key characteristic of which is to participate in and uphold commitments to status quo international economic and security institutions' (Johnston 2008, 205).

In particular, Johnston argues that Chinese leaders and foreign policy makers have adopted a more cooperative stance on security institutions – defined as 'more or less formal organizations with identifiable names and with more or less obvious criteria for membership or participation' (Johnston 2008, 27) – between 1980 and 2000, through socialisation's micro-processes of mimicking, persuasion, and social influence. He finds that in contrast to a hard realpolitik ideology inherited from the Mao era, contemporary decision makers have shifted their understanding of participation in security regimes as a result of social interaction and as a product of dynamics of identity construction and differentiation (Johnston 2008).

Just after China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, scholars started exploring the country's compliance with the norms and rules of international organisations (IOs), as well as the role of the latter in facilitating China's socialisation. Most of this scholarship agrees that while international organisations contribute to the socialisation of participating parties, they also represent a challenge to them, as they simultaneously confirm and constrain sovereignty (Kent 2002). China's newcomer status meant a steep learning curve in the last 30 years, Kent argues, mediated by its many identities, mainly as a great power and developing country, and led China to prefer bilateral arrangements to multilateral mechanisms. However, Chinese leaders soon realised that international institutions could also serve as a platform for constructing the country's international image and legitimacy, as well as a platform to project its power according to the leaders' cultural realist perspective (Johnston 2008; Kent 2002). China is not only motivated by a system-maintaining and system-exploiting approach (norms-taking), but also by a system-reforming attitude (norms-making), and thus has committed to making a shift to a multipolar world (Kent 2002; Kim 1999).

According to this literature, therefore, China has been successfully socialised into IOs – where success is measured as the shift from being a recalcitrant and rogue state to being integrated into an increasingly interdependent Western, though mostly US-infused, system. While I do agree with Johnston that the PRC's increased integration is a more useful criterion to assess the country's behaviour in international politics than the China threat/rise discourse, there are two major problems with such analyses: one that is general, but applicable to the case of China, and one which is topic-specific. First, I follow Acharya in arguing that mainstream IR theories have tended to privilege hegemonic power and socialisation in international order-building (Acharya 2008); the literature on normative change, he contends, is 'biased in favour of a "moral cosmopolitanism"'. It concentrates on moral struggles in which *good* global norms (championed by mainly Western norm entrepreneurs) displace *bad* local beliefs and practices (mainly in the non-Western areas)' (Acharya 2009, 4). Alternative projects, such as non-hegemonic international order theory, go beyond IR's primary concern with great power geopolitics, starting from the premise that while hegemony might produce order, it does so at the expense of weaker actors (Acharya 2008). Non-hegemonic moments can be found throughout history, one example being the Chinese tributary system, which he argues was geared toward benign

Chinese Diplomacy in Africa: Constructing the Security-Development Nexus

Written by Ilaria Carrozza

outcomes, particularly the maintenance of trade, and was very different from European colonialism. In the context of socialisation, hegemony is manifested in the attempt of the (liberal) hegemon to socialise secondary states into liberal norms and rules, reflected in what Park identifies as the focus of socialisation literature not so much on who is being socialised, but rather what they are being socialised into (Park 2014).

Second, scholarship on China's socialisation has ignored that the PRC has also been the agent of socialisation – what scholars have called a two-way socialisation (Pu 2012) – especially via the re-articulation of concepts of state sovereignty and intervention, and this has in turn encountered responses from within regions of the Global South. In the following section I elaborate on the second point, using the example of China's use of regional forum diplomacy in Africa as a tool of security norms-making.

China's Regional Forum Diplomacy: The FOCAC

The FOCAC was established in 2000 as a dialogue platform to foster Sino-African exchanges on a broad variety of topics and issues, and which follows an exponential increase in cooperation between the two actors from the late-1990s and early-2000s. It can be seen as the institutionalisation of Sino-African relations and the formalisation of long-lasting ties (Taylor 2011). Ministers and heads of states from 53 member countries, as well as the African Union, which was recently included as a full member, gather together with their Chinese counterparts every three years, alternately in China and Africa. The purpose of the meetings is manifold: first, to counter Taiwan's influence; second, to promote an overall Chinese foreign policy strategy towards the continent which emphasises South-South cooperation and economic development; third, to advertise Beijing's leadership position of 'moral relativism' on issues such as human rights, as well as their own vision of the global order (Alden and Alves 2016; Taylor 2011). In practical terms, FOCAC Action Plans discuss future cooperation in the areas of 'trade, investment, poverty reduction, infrastructure building, capacity building, human resources development, food security, hi-tech industries', and, more recently, peace and security (Li and Funeka Yazini 2013).

The FOCAC hence represents a global governance platform for Chinese decision makers to discuss the agenda plans and future development goals with their African counterparts (Benabdallah 2016a). The Forum also provides the Chinese leadership with opportunities to enhance its role in global governance. First, it offers Chinese policy makers a feedback loop from African leaders so that they can continuously adjust and adapt their policies. Second, interaction on such a wide range of subjects enhances the international practice and credibility of Chinese practitioners, soldiers and policy makers alike. Finally, projects implemented via the FOCAC give China a chance to test its development-led model on African contexts and thus gain experience and feedback (Benabdallah 2016a). Indeed, the FOCAC plays an important role in China's regional forum diplomacy, which the PRC has been implementing elsewhere in the world.[4] According to officials in Beijing, regional forums are efficient and time-saving, and they also reflect China's 'new type of major power relations': instead of focusing on major powers, this group cooperation diplomacy is aimed to gather comparatively smaller countries – a move that makes it easier for China to promote its key official priorities and development model (Ekman 2016, 1). Regional forum diplomacy, in turn, is part of a wider attempt to become a global normative power through seeking recognition by other fellow developing countries (Alden and Alves 2017).

This speaks directly to what I have identified as a gap in the socialisation literature on China, namely its ambitions as a norms-maker besides its norm-taking: China's FOCAC diplomacy, I argue, is based on a discourse that frames China and Africa as friends and allies in the common struggle against Western hegemony. In so doing, Chinese decision makers have been able to successfully socialise African leaders into a narrative of South-South cooperation that calls for increased cooperation and is based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence – namely, mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs; equality and cooperation for mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence. In particular, peace and security have come to be at the forefront of these ties in a way that was almost unimaginable only fifteen years ago.

Through a discourse analysis of FOCAC output documents, as well as speeches given by Chinese Presidents and officials, I show how China has so far been successful at combining and recombining existing linguistic signs (i.e. North/South, developed/developing), thus creating a coherent discourse around security in Africa that has enabled

Chinese Diplomacy in Africa: Constructing the Security-Development Nexus

Written by Ilaria Carrozza

Beijing to span across a relatively wide range of policy options without deviating from such major representations. The analysis of FOCAC-related documents thus highlights continuities in Chinese decision makers' representations of the China-Africa story in the face of increased insecurity and instability on the continent.[5] Since the Forum's inception in 2000, attention to peace and security, and peacekeeping in particular, has gained prominence. This has resulted in a shift in policies from non-involvement to considerable engagement in a variety of security related activities. Simultaneously, the basic discourse that sustains China's Africa policies has essentially remained the same.

First of all, China and Africa are presented as all-round 'friends', with China clearly characterised as a fellow developing country (FOCAC 2009a). Their friendship is a long-lasting one, dating back to the early Ming dynasty – a friendship which had been maintained long enough, and is therefore likely to continue for as long (Sverdrup-Thygeson 2017). Furthermore, in ancient times Chinese and African civilisations used to be 'splendid' and 'distinctive', whilst in modern times they have been threatened by colonialism and have jointly mobilised against 'subjugation' (Hu 2009). In the case of Africa, this refers to the struggles for independence from European colonial powers from the 1950s throughout the 1970s. In the case of China, it refers to British encroachment following the first Opium War (1839–1842) and the 'century of national humiliation', from which China is believed to have recovered only with victory over Japan in 1945 and the founding of the PRC in 1949.

This historical narrative – 'the colony narrative' – is often used as a tool in China's Africa policy (Sverdrup-Thygeson 2017). In short, Sverdrup-Thygeson argues,

Beijing is [...] challenging the current historicity applied to the African continent by bringing forth a set of historical narratives that serves [...] also to turn the tables with regard to the Western actors that find themselves occupying the unusual role of the "Other" in this new mode of regarding Sino-African history' (Sverdrup-Thygeson 2017, 56).

Hence, China and African countries are depicted as sympathetic members of the same community of developing countries with 'common fundamental interests'. The two then share a temporal identity, which belongs to a glorious past, and an ethical one, which makes them victims of subjugation, colonialism, and imperialism.

Unlike in ancient times, today's international order is not a friendly environment for developing countries: another important representation is 'globalisation' as a 'challenge' and a 'risk'. The first Action Plan states that 'globalisation currently represents more challenges and risks than opportunities to the vast number of developing countries' (FOCAC 2000). The depiction of globalisation as a challenge remained largely stable throughout the first three Forums and was then replaced entirely by concerns about the global financial crisis starting from the fourth Action Plan. In the former case (globalisation as a threat to developing countries), the implication is that developed countries, which have shaped the current world order according to their norms and interests, are benefitting from globalisation, whilst developing countries, including China, are left with a series of arduous tasks. In the latter case (financial crisis as a threat), China, whilst acknowledging the damages it itself had suffered, simultaneously distances itself from those more in need (FOCAC 2009b). Interestingly, both narratives equally justify and legitimise increasing economic contributions to the continent. Either way, it seems Chinese leaders believe that issues of development should not be overlooked even at times of crisis.

Broadly speaking, the unjust current world system is rooted not only in the economic, but also in the scientific and technological gaps between the 'North' and the 'South'. Imbalances between the two are the symptom that '[h]egemonism and power politics still exist. Developing countries are still faced with an arduous task of safeguarding their sovereignty, security and interests' (Jiang 2000). Hegemony is thus represented by the domination of developed countries in the current world order, which are also responsible for practicing power politics, as well as for exploiting natural resources from developing countries. Such hegemony is held responsible for poverty and backwardness which are the 'true' causes of conflicts in the continent (Jiang 2000). The current world order is therefore inequitable, because it was tailored to developed countries' needs.

Finally, adherence to the principles of 'non-interference in other's internal affairs' and respect for state sovereignty is a milestone of China's Africa discourse. China reiterates 'support for [African countries'] efforts in independently

Chinese Diplomacy in Africa: Constructing the Security-Development Nexus

Written by Ilaria Carrozza

resolving regional conflicts and strengthening democracy and good governance and oppose the interference in Africa's internal affairs by external forces in pursuit of their own interests' (FOCAC 2012). Often accused by some of being neo-colonialist,[6] Chinese leaders have rejected such accusations by arguing that:

The structure of trade between China and Africa that is based on energy and resources should indeed be improved. Meanwhile, the same situation exists between Africa and all its major trading partners. [...] China-Africa cooperation does not match that between Africa and its traditional partners in either scope or depth. [...] One should also recognize that the unfair and unreasonable international political and economic order is still a major obstacle hindering Africa's development. To reverse the situation, it is crucial that those countries leading international relations make an effort (Zhai 2012).

To sum up, the Chinese discourse constructs China-Africa relations within a broader logic of South-South cooperation, whereby the 'South', according to Alden, Morphet, and Vieira, forms a source of identity for both state and non-state actors – an identity that is constantly negotiated at the meetings of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the G77, and other regional and sub-regional organisations and which encapsulates the common experience of colonialism and imperialism. Ultimately, the 'South' is being used as a mobilising strategy based upon a critique of the asymmetries and inequalities of the contemporary international system (Alden, Morphet and Vieira 2010).

Legitimising the Security-Development Nexus

In the preceding section I identified the main 'master signifiers' [7] that Chinese decision makers have been employing when constructing China-Africa relations within a South-South cooperation framework. Such a discourse portrays policies directed at helping African countries develop economically as a need, a duty, and a priority. Within such a framework, security occupies an important place. However, the extent to which security has been a part of China's Africa policy has changed throughout the years. Arguably, from being relatively marginal in the first two Forums (FOCAC 2000; FOCAC 2003), it started becoming increasingly prominent from 2004-2005. China's engagement in Sudan and in the peace process undoubtedly marks a crucial moment in the PRC's engagement in peace and security in Africa, and the existing IR literature documents well the motives and dynamics of this shift (Barber 2014; Large 2009; Large 2011). From then on, peace and security, and peacekeeping in particular, feature prominently in all FOCAC action plans (FOCAC 2009c; FOCAC 2009b; FOCAC 2015, FOCAC 2018).

Sustainable security means that we need to focus on both development and security so that security would be durable. As a Chinese saying goes, for a tree to grow tall, a strong and solid root is required; for a river to reach far, an unimpeded source is necessary. Development is the foundation of security, and security the precondition for development. The tree of peace does not grow on barren land while the fruit of development is not produced amidst flames of war (Xi 2014).

Such a security-development nexus creates a sort of quasi-causal argument[9]: Since security can only be achieved through development, China is justified in providing substantial economic aid to African countries in order to simultaneously promote security. Such a nexus is considered appropriate by both parties, as Africans seem to have embraced the China model based on development-first policies. Hence, such discourse legitimises developmental, infrastructure, and logistics-related policies in light of the pursuit of peace and security. Arguably, security issues have gained more prominence in China's Africa policy, which reflect a major change in its security policies on the continent. The analysis above has showed that the official discourse has remained constant throughout the years: The centrality of the security-development nexus allows Chinese leaders to modify their policies toward peace and security without changing the narratives behind it. As the largest developing country and leader of the developing world, China has an almost moral obligation to provide economic assistance to African countries. Crucially, economic development is considered an essential tool in achieving security. This is said to be in line with continental priorities, and the African Union itself is premised on the securitisation of development: Security is a prerequisite for development, and the barriers between security, governance, and development are not rigid but rather malleable (Chitiyo 2010).

What can be observed in the discourse as highlighted above, is another often ignored aspect of the relationship

Chinese Diplomacy in Africa: Constructing the Security-Development Nexus

Written by Ilaria Carrozza

between security and development, described as the 'developmentalisation' of security. Both Chinese and Africans seem to agree that 'security forces can, and should on occasion, contribute directly or indirectly to development' (Chitiyo 2010, 26). In the years between 2000 and 2015, China used policies that both emphasised the importance of promoting development in order to achieve peace, and promoted an understanding of peace and security as major factors in achieving sustainable development. Lately, increased contributions to peace and security measures, whilst still accompanied by economic and financial aid, reflect a focus on the securitisation of development. Such shifts in policies were possible to enact even without a change in China's basic discourse, because such discourse already contained all the elements necessary to range from a set of policies to the other.

The endurance of China's construction of its own identity as a faithful friend to African countries throughout the years of the FOCAC does not only depend on Chinese leaders' intriguing articulation of such identity and related policies. For the purposes of this chapter, it will suffice to say that China's processes of articulation and interpellation (Weldes 1996) have been successful in constructing China-Africa friendship as opposed to colonialist practices perpetrated by developed countries. Similarly successful has been the construction of the security-development nexus as central to its policies, even when these have shifted from focusing on the importance of economic development as a driver of peace, to focusing on the centrality of security to achieve sustainable development. African leaders have been interpellated into the language of security and development as members of the same group of developing countries with a 'shared destiny'.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued for the need to re-examine common theoretical approaches to China's socialisation in international relations. Whilst acknowledging that the literature on socialisation has done a great deal in compensating for the shortcomings of most mainstream approaches, two main problems remain unaddressed: first, a bias in favour of a Western liberal order and 'good' norms. Second, such literature has neglected that China is both the *object* and *subject* of socialisation dynamics, an example of which can be found in the re-articulation of concepts of state sovereignty and intervention. The most effective way of doing so is through regional forum diplomacy, which in turn forms part of a wider attempt to become a global normative power (Alden and Alves 2017; Benabdallah 2016a).

China has showed ambition to become a norms-maker by trying to move away from ad hoc participation to Africa's peace and security to 'gradualist forms of engagement that include fomenting common Chinese-African values and re-imagining liberal norms on intervention' (Alden and Large 2015, 125). I have taken the example of the FOCAC to show how China has successfully articulated a discourse on Sino-African ties which has gained wide acceptance among African leaders. By constructing its own identity as a fellow developing country which is ready to 'assist' through thick and thin, China has thus established its own interests in peace and security on the continent. Simultaneously, by accepting and embracing such narratives, African leaders have found themselves comfortable in their identity as developing countries in need of assistance from a friend, and have thus established their interests too, in what is being described as a win-win situation.

Notes

[1] Much of the debate reflects concerns among policymakers and analysts within the US and tends to be biased. For more on this, see Economy and Oksenberg 1999.

[2] Although, to be sure, China has a reasonably clear and stable set of aims that include increase in the country's power, continued development and increase in prosperity, defence of territorial integrity, and domestic stability under CCP rule (See Buzan 2014 and Hughes 2016).

[3] Socialisation is referred to as 'the process that is directed toward a state's internalization of the constitutive beliefs and practices institutionalized in its international environment', as defined by (Schimmelfenning 2000). I follow his definition here.

Chinese Diplomacy in Africa: Constructing the Security-Development Nexus

Written by Ilaria Carrozza

[4] See for instance the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (2004), the China-Central and Eastern European Countries Cooperation Forum, or 16+1 (2012), and the China-CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) Forum (2015) (Ekman 2016).

[5] I only include a handful of direct quotations from the documents, and I leave it to the interested reader to check on the others. In conducting discourse analysis, I employed a variety of textual mechanisms, including presupposition, predicate analysis, subject positioning, and metaphorical analysis (Dunn and Neumann 2016).

[6] See for instance: Gaye 2006; Online Debate: Is Chinese Investment Good for Africa? 2007; Cardenal and Araújo 2013; French 2014.

[7] 'Master signifiers' is first used by Derrida; Laclau and Mouffe call them 'nodal points'. They are the result of exposing 'the practices and possibilities engendered by various textual mechanisms within individual texts and discourses in general' (Dunn and Neumann 2016).

[8] To be sure, while the link between security and development has its origins in Western thought, from the Enlightenment onwards (see Duffield 2001; Hettne 2010), it does have its equivalent in China, as Benabdallah also notes (2016a), and Chinese policy makers have been especially eager to use the concept in their Africa discourse, making the nexus one of the key elements of their foreign policy towards the 'Global South'.

[9] For more on such quasi-causal arguments, see Weldes 1996

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Chinese Diplomacy in Africa: Constructing the Security-Development Nexus

Written by Ilaria Carrozza

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Written by Ilaria Carrozza

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Chinese Diplomacy in Africa: Constructing the Security-Development Nexus

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About the author:

Ilaria Carrozza is a Project Coordinator at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). Her current research at PRIO focuses on security force assistance to developing countries in Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. She has a long-standing interest in Chinese politics, China-Africa relations, the Global South, and international security. Prior to joining PRIO, she completed her PhD in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She was also the editor of the Millennium Journal of International Studies and a visiting researcher at the School of International Studies at Peking University.