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China and the Reshaping of Global Conflict Prevention Norms

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines China's influence on established global conflict prevention norms. It finds that China's approach rests on noninterference and strong state capacity to deliver domestic stability embedded in international norm-shaping efforts underway as part of China's overall strategy in relation to global security. Commissioned by the United States Institute of Peace, the report builds on the Institute's extensive study and practice of conflict analysis and prevention, and its research on China's influence on conflict dynamics around the world.

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Cover photo: A globe sculpture is displayed outside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs office in Beijing on August 3, 2022. For a decade or more, the People's Republic of China has shown a growing interest in playing a larger role in preventing and mitigating regional conflict and instability. (Photo by Andy Wong/AP)

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Summary



For a decade or more, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has shown a growing interest in playing a larger role in preventing and mitigating regional conflict and instability. This ambition is being pursued through a variety of avenues, from funding streams for UN projects to promoting its own security norms through regional organizations and providing security assistance to countries in the Global South.

China's evolving operational approach is embedded in larger systemic and structural principles and norm-shaping efforts underway as part of the country's overall strategy in relation to international security. China's approach appears on track to influence established conflict prevention norms in ways that align more favorably with China's preferences for a strong state, noninterference, and domestic stability and security.

Whereas China traditionally stressed that economic development is the most important factor to achieve stability and prevent conflict, today, the "securitization" of PRC foreign policy broadly speaking has accelerated, including in relation to China's international activities to prevent conflict. China's own domestic policy thinking, which has increasingly raised the salience of "security first" as a means of addressing internal tensions and instabilities, is being exported both in rhetoric and action at the systemic, structural, and operational levels.

China's efforts to shape conflict prevention norms focus primarily on government-to-government engagement, either bilaterally or multilaterally. There seems to be little room in the PRC calculus for engagement with community organizations, opposition forces, or domestic and international nongovernmental organizations as part of a holistic conflict prevention process. China seeks to diffuse its conflict prevention approach through intergovernmental organizations, including the United Nations and regional bodies in which China plays a leading role. This strategy is designed to win international legitimacy for its preferred norms and practices. China's conflict prevention activities are also focused on its periphery and the Global South more broadly, where China has significant economic and political stakes.

China's activities have a coherence that requires a similarly coherent response from the United States—one that is calibrated to address current and evolving challenges, is responsive to the needs of conflict-affected countries, and is flexible enough to address the systemic, structural, and operational dimensions of China's growing role in conflict prevention.



China's first special envoy to the Horn of Africa, Xue Bing, speaks at a press conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on June 20, 2022. China sponsored a two-day peace conference aimed at stabilizing the region. (Photo by AP)

Introduction

As the United States enters a “post-Afghanistan era” and with great power competition on the rise, questions abound about the role of the world’s major powers, and the multilateral institutions they lead, in preventing conflict. Many of these questions are rightly being asked about the People’s Republic of China (hereafter the PRC or China). As it has become a more powerful and influential actor—economically, politically, and militarily—China has demonstrated growing interest in playing a larger role in preventing international conflict through both multilateral and bilateral frameworks. To date, little attention has been given to China’s activities in this area, a gap in understanding this report is designed to help fill.

China has taken a number of steps, particularly over the last decade since the beginning of Xi Jinping’s tenure as the country’s paramount leader, to position itself as a source of international leadership and insight about how to mitigate the risk of conflict and instability around the world.¹ Examples of recent Chinese actions include the following:

- Engaging in conflict mediation efforts in Afghanistan, Myanmar, Sudan, and the Great Lakes region of East Africa
- Establishing its first overseas military base in Djibouti

- Promoting Xi's signature foreign policy undertaking, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as a preventive diplomacy tool
- Creating the \$200 million United Nations Peace and Development Trust Fund and its Secretary-General's Peace and Security Sub-Fund
- Showcasing its capabilities in reducing the risks of so-called color revolutions to Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) members²
- Reaching agreements with Solomon Islands allowing for the provision of Chinese security forces to support the nation's social order and law enforcement
- Releasing a position paper on the political settlement of Russia's war in Ukraine
- Hosting talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran that culminated in a joint statement announcing the resumption of Saudi-Iran diplomatic relations

Over the course of 2022, even as the country remained on virtual lockdown as part of its “zero COVID” policy, China introduced several additional regional initiatives. In January, for example, China proposed a new peace effort for the Horn of Africa in its “Outlook for Peace and Development in the Horn of Africa,” and, in June, China sponsored a two-day peace conference aimed at stabilizing the region. The conference, which included the participation of senior officials from seven East African nations, resulted in a joint statement and action plan pledging deeper cooperation among the participants to resolve regional security challenges. The following month, the second annual China-Africa Peace and Security Forum featured remarks by then PRC defense minister and member of the Central Military Commission General Wei Fenghe and attended by 50 ministerial and other senior-level officials from African national governments and the African Union.

China's positions on international conflict also attracted attention in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, especially as only weeks before Russia's “special military operation” the two nations declared that their partnership had “no limits.”³ However, hopes that these close ties might provide the basis for China to act as peacemaker early in the conflict were dashed; China's official statements and state media amplified Russian rationalizations for its war against Ukraine, while Beijing did little to resolve the conflict. Indeed, Beijing's approach to the Ukraine crisis has thrown into even sharper relief the complexity and contradictions of China's positions and interests when it comes to conflict and conflict prevention.⁴ Since Russia's invasion, China has repeatedly underscored its commitment to sovereignty and territorial integrity and its rejection of the use of force, also stating that it supports Ukraine's sovereignty. Yet, more than a year into the conflict, Beijing had not condemned Moscow for its invasion of Ukraine and had made it clear that it saw US and NATO behavior as the catalyst for Russia's attack.⁵ Efforts by Kyiv to engage Beijing went unanswered until April 2023, while ties between Beijing and Moscow apparently deepened, with China increasing imports of Russian energy and Xi Jinping traveling to Moscow in March 2023 to affirm the Sino-Russian strategic partnership.

Moreover, the Global Security Initiative (GSI) launched by Xi Jinping at the April 2022 Boao Forum and described in February 2023 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in a “concept paper” is long on declaratory principles about the need for a new approach to international security but short on substance. Although the GSI comprises themes consistent in many respects with thinking China has promoted for decades, it includes some concepts that are hard to reconcile with China's stated positions on sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the use of force. For example, it refers to the idea of “indivisible security,” a term Beijing had not emphasized so strongly in the past. Closely associated with the Helsinki Accords of the mid-1970s,

this concept states that the security of one nation is inseparable from the security of its neighbors in the same region. Crucially, it is a term that Russia relied on to justify its invasion of Ukraine.⁶ Xi Jinping and top Chinese officials have since referenced the GSI in an array of international and regional forums, ranging from the United Nations to the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), as well as in numerous bilateral statements.⁷ These and other related developments provide increasing evidence of Beijing's ambition to shape international narratives in matters of peace and security.

It is also becoming increasingly clear that Beijing's preferred approaches to conflict prevention diverge in critical respects from those that reflect the norms and mechanisms of established multilateral security institutions and other actors with a mission to prevent conflict. Beijing's prominent role in international and regional organizations enables it to promote its preferences to the potential detriment of UN-adopted principles and norms for reducing the risks of conflict and sustaining peace. These principles and norms include emphasizing human rights, human security, and inclusive development as well as involving stakeholders beyond governments in efforts to avert violent conflict.⁸

To explore why and how Beijing's conflict prevention preferences depart from established norms, this report draws on official Chinese sources, writings by Chinese scholars and international specialists, and insights from Chinese and other international experts who closely follow the evolution of conflict prevention norms and policies. This research addresses four principal questions:

- How is China approaching conflict prevention, and how does its approach appear to differ from existing norms and frameworks?
- What are the domestic and international drivers of China's preferences for conflict prevention?
- Which cases stand out as illustrative examples of China's approach to conflict prevention norms, and what can be learned from them? Which cases should be more deeply explored?
- How will China's approach to conflict prevention norms affect multilateral security institutions, regional security norms and mechanisms, and the interests and preferences of the United States and other key international players?

This study addresses these questions and related issues by laying out what is known about China's approaches to conflict prevention and their implementation. It begins by briefly defining conflict prevention and highlighting a number of established frameworks and international approaches; it then explores PRC principles, positions, and policies, as well as actions taken in multilateral, bilateral, and unilateral contexts. Next, the report delves into three specific case studies to shed greater light on China's approach to conflict prevention. These case studies describe relevant developments in relation to the United Nations Peace and Development Trust Fund, which China has funded; a pair of regional institutions in which China is an influential player, namely, the SCO and the CICA; and China–Solomon Islands relations. The report concludes with an analysis of Beijing's future role as an international security actor, the implications of these developments for the United States, and recommendations for US policy.

Definitions of and Frameworks for Conflict Prevention



In this report, the term “conflict prevention” is used in a broad sense, defined as an approach or intervention to prevent the escalation of intrastate or interstate tensions and disputes into significant violence.⁹ Although debates exist on how to define conflict prevention, this working definition, along with several other frameworks drawn from the academic literature on conflict prevention, proves useful for this research.¹⁰ One framework is the three-level categorization of conflict prevention into systemic, structural, and operational activities, elaborated below. A second valuable framework is the idea of a “conflict curve,” as developed by Michael Lund (see figure 1 on page 5). The conflict curve divides the life cycle of a conflict into four stages, each of which requires distinct types of potential intervention. Marking the far left of the curve is a stage of stable peace, which gives way to a stage of unstable peace, followed by growing instability and crisis, and culminating in the outbreak of violence at the crest of the curve. The right-hand side of the curve illustrates a phase in the conflict cycle when activities to prevent a recurrence of violence would be relevant.¹¹ On the curve, conflict prevention occurs when tensions among parties may be elevated, but violence is either absent or only sporadic.

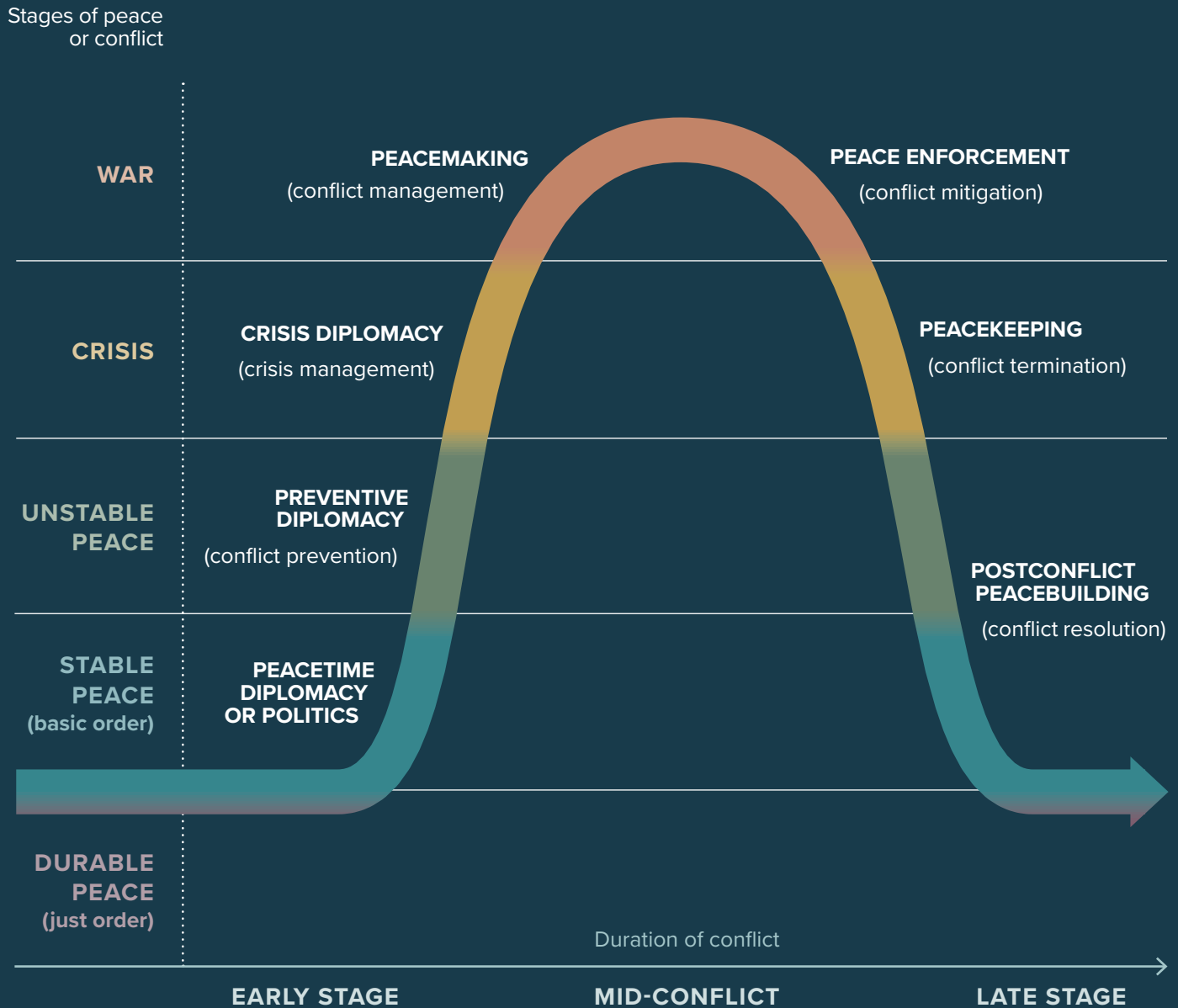
An additional important reference is a joint World Bank and United Nations study, *Pathways to Peace*, which has become a key text in the conflict prevention field. Published in 2018, its definition of conflict prevention is more expansive than Lund’s, comprising activities across all phases of a conflict, including the outbreak of conflict as well as potential escalation.¹²

This expansive framing of conflict prevention emerged from initiatives to mitigate international conflict and lessons drawn from intrastate conflict that ensued after the Cold War.¹³ Previously, the United Nations had focused most heavily at the operational level on the role of “preventive diplomacy,” a term associated with Lund. Responsibility for abating conflict had been seen as residing with UN member governments, and emphasis had been placed on preventing a widening of a conflict to include more actors.¹⁴ However, efforts led by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and its predecessor, the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), to bridge the Cold War divide showed the value of approaches—ranging from coercive diplomacy to post-agreement peace-keeping—that are “aimed at preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict, addressing root causes, assisting parties to conflict to end hostilities, ensuring national reconciliation and moving towards recovery, reconstruction, and development.”¹⁵ The CSCE’s and OSCE’s activities also illustrated the efficacy of early warning and early action monitoring processes and the inclusion of nongovernmental actors as well as governments in processes aimed at mitigating conflict.¹⁶

Responses to the intrastate wars that erupted after the Cold War normalized humanitarian interventions to mitigate potential violence against civilians as encapsulated in the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) adopted by UN member states in 2005. Those post-Cold War intrastate wars also galvanized efforts to increase the capacity of multilateral institutions around

Figure 1. Conflict curve

The vertical axis shows the intensity of conflict and levels of violence; the horizontal axis shows the duration of conflict over time.



Sources: Based on Michael S. Lund, *Preventing Violent Conflicts: A Strategy for Preventive Diplomacy* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1996), 38; and Dan Snodderly, ed., *Peace Terms: Glossary of Terms for Conflict Management and Peacebuilding* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2018), 24.

the world to prevent conflict. New initiatives and approaches, such as the human security approach, sought to uncover the root causes of vulnerabilities that can lead to violent conflict.¹⁷

To generalize and greatly oversimplify, today's international conflict prevention norms are broadly based on lessons drawn from international and intrastate conflict, especially since the end of the Cold War. Using a three-level framework of systemic, structural, and operational activities, these norms can be summarized as follows:

- A systemic emphasis on enhancing the mandate and capacity of global and regional multilateral institutions and partnerships to take action to prevent violent conflict
- A structural emphasis on “deep prevention” focused on eliminating the underlying sources of conflict by creating political, economic, and societal conditions that favor peaceful and resilient communities through such measures as strengthening protections for human rights and accountable government, fostering a thriving civil society, and promoting inclusive and sustainable development¹⁸
- An operational emphasis on conflict prevention through preventive diplomacy, preventive peacekeeping, confidence-building measures, sanctions, preventive deployment of police and other armed forces, and other processes that depend on inclusiveness, transparency, and accountability (such as the inclusion of nongovernmental actors and monitoring and early warning)

China is increasingly active today across all three levels, but in ways that often differ from established norms: seeking to constrain at the systemic level how the international community defines and acts on conflict prevention; favoring a security-first approach

at the structural level to mitigate underlying sources of societal conflict; and expanding its assistance at the operational level to help governments prevent the emergence of internal conflicts. It should be noted that, at the structural level, China's efforts to shape conflict prevention norms focus primarily on government-to-government engagement, with little attention to community organizations, opposition forces, or domestic and international nongovernmental organizations. Moreover, whereas historically China has contended that economic development is the basis for stability and critical to preventing conflict, PRC foreign policy today is increasingly securitized, including in relation to China's international activities to prevent and mitigate conflict. Indeed, this shift reflects the movement in China's own domestic policy thinking toward a greater emphasis on security, framed as “comprehensive national security,” which it defines as “taking people's security as the purpose, political security as the base, economic security as the foundation, military, cultural and social security as the guarantee, and promotion of international security as the backbone.”¹⁹

As China pursues greater influence on the global stage as a source of international security, in effect it is exporting this emphasis and its preference for proactive and even preemptive security measures in both rhetoric and action at the systemic, structural, and operational levels. China's strengths include, at the systemic level, its potential to shape diplomatic norms; at the structural level, its capacity to offer economic incentives and promote a security-first approach to societal stability; and at the operational level, its “soft security” capabilities, such as security forces training, equipment, and surveillance capabilities. Relating this to the conflict curve, the research for this report suggests that even as China has become engaged in efforts to mitigate conflict at all stages depicted on the conflict curve, its emphasis is foremost on the left side of the arc, where its capabilities and preferences can be deployed to secure stability.

China's Approach to Conflict Prevention

It is important to underscore that the very term “conflict prevention” (预防冲突) is one that PRC officials and scholars tend to avoid. The general preference in Chinese expert circles is to use the term “preventive diplomacy” (预防性外交) instead.²⁰ Additionally, some of the PRC’s efforts that could be described as conflict prevention activities are carried out by Beijing under the label of promoting regional security and stability.²¹ Furthermore, official discourse will use alternative terms for conflict areas such as “hot spots” (热点) or “hot-spot issues” (热点问题).²² As one leading British scholar noted, the term “conflict prevention” in China can be linked to Western intervention, particularly military intervention.²³ Nevertheless, Chinese officials have used the term in certain contexts, such as during UN discussions on the subject.²⁴ Chinese officials have also emphasized prevention in other contexts, such as US-China relations. For example, in a December 2021 interview, then Chinese ambassador to the United States Qin Gang responded to a question about the United States and China managing crises around Taiwan by stating that crisis prevention is more important than crisis management.²⁵

There is some Chinese scholarship that defines conflict prevention in terms that chime with common Western definitions. For example, PRC scholar Xue Ying divides conflict prevention into two different types: “direct prevention” (直接性预防) and “structural prevention” (结构性预防). The former involves short-term actions at the operational level to prevent the escalation of potential conflict, including dialogue, confidence-building measures, sanctions, coercive diplomacy, special

representatives, and preventive deployments. The latter focuses on long-term intervention measures aimed at changing the social, economic, political, and structural factors in potential conflict areas to reduce the likelihood of future violent conflicts.²⁶

However, examining China’s evolving approach to conflict prevention from the systemic, structural, and operational points of view reveals many distinctive features. This evolution should be placed within the wider geopolitical context of China’s rise as an increasingly prominent and influential global player, especially since the ascent to power of Xi Jinping as the country’s paramount leader, and Beijing’s much more proactive role in regional security.

At the systemic level, Chinese officials and experts have generally seen the United Nations as occupying a critical position in conflict prevention, given its status as the most “universal, representative, and authoritative intergovernmental international organization.”²⁷ There is considerable consensus within China’s official and scholarly communities that it is important to adhere to UN principles of sovereignty and noninterference, with the will and consent of the conflict parties—especially the sitting government—being respected. However, how China interprets these principles diverges in some respects from how other UN member states do.

For instance, R2P has promoted a more flexible understanding of sovereignty based on responsibility. While there has been some recognition of limitations on sovereignty by Chinese officials and experts, the PRC has

emphasized a more statist approach to R2P that focuses on strengthening prevention by building a state's capacity to protect its citizens and not on instances where a government is unwilling to act.²⁸ Following the 2011 NATO-led intervention in Libya, which was authorized under UN Security Council Resolution 1973 to “take all necessary measures . . . to protect civilians and civilian populated areas,” Chinese experts and officials criticized R2P (保护的责任), asserting that Western countries were using the principle to carry out “new interventionism” (新干涉注意).²⁹ Ruan Zongze, then vice president of the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), a research institute directly administered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, proposed an alternative concept, “responsible protection” (负责任的保护), which outlined six elements of intervention, including that the “goal of protection should be to prevent or alleviate a humanitarian disaster, rather than the overthrow of a government.”³⁰ However, as the Australian scholar Courtney Fung observes, the responsible protection initiative was short-lived, with China backing Brazil's “responsibility while protecting” (保护中的责任) concept.³¹

Beginning in the 1990s, China became active in supporting regional multilateral peace and security processes, favoring the empowerment of regional and subregional entities. In 2019, China's then UN ambassador, Ma Zhaoxu, noted that regional organizations have unique advantages in managing regional affairs and should be further supported in their role in preventing regional conflicts.³² Beijing has prioritized regional organizations in which it exercises significant, if not preponderant, influence in its efforts to promote peace and stability. These organizations include the SCO, the CICA, the China-Africa Peace and Security Forum, and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) initiative, among others. Its activities through these organizations offer concrete examples of a systemic approach to conflict prevention at the regional level.

Linking conflict prevention to economic development has been an important dimension of Chinese thinking

about conflict prevention. Chinese experts and officials make the structural argument that doing so tackles conflicts' “root causes” (根源).³³ For example, He Yin of the China Peacekeeping Policy Training Center uses the term “developmental peace” (发展和平) to capture the view that “successful national development, with economic development as the foundation, is the solution to conflicts.”³⁴ He contrasts norms of developmental peace with those of “liberal peace” (自由和平), observing that the former sees a strong state as crucial to stable political, economic, and social affairs, while the latter prioritizes broad societal participation in governance and conflict prevention processes.³⁵ This framework reflects themes found in official statements. For instance, at a UN Security Council debate on preventive diplomacy in 2021, China's ambassador, Zhang Jun, asserted that lasting peace and stability can be achieved only by eliminating the root causes of conflicts. To address the root causes, countries in conflict should be supported to “enhance their government capacity” and “focus on development,” among other actions.³⁶

Official statements explicitly highlight connections between China's major international development initiatives and conflict mitigation, most notably in reference to its principal infrastructure development and connectivity strategy, the BRI. For example, Xi Jinping in 2017 stated that “we should build the Belt and Road into a road for peace.”³⁷ Additionally, in 2022, China's UN ambassador described the aims of the BRI and the Global Development Initiative—first announced by Xi in 2021 as a plan to “steer global development to a new stage of balanced, coordinated and inclusive growth”—as helping countries resolve development challenges and achieve lasting peace through sustainable development.³⁸ Official Chinese discourse also links the BRI to China's role in preventive diplomacy involving various multilateral organizations, including the United Nations, the Arab League, and the African Union.³⁹

As noted, however, under Xi Jinping, there has been a growing emphasis on security as fundamental to

Rather than emphasizing “development first” or stressing the importance of “developmental peace” as a paradigm for stabilizing international relations, the PRC’s foreign policy today exhibits a growing tendency toward securitization, and this extends to conflict prevention norms.

both development and peace. This reflects a strengthened emphasis on security in China’s domestic policy. China’s new paradigm for national security starts with the idea of “safe China,” signifying a China that can have a high degree of confidence in its economic security, social stability, and ability to protect its citizens. China’s 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–25) emphasizes policies that “build a firm protective screen for national security” and contribute to integrating security into “every domain and every process of national development” in order to “prevent and resolve the various risks that . . . influence the country’s modernization process.”⁴⁰ During Xi’s tenure, budgets for domestic security across the country have seen double-digit growth, with spending on public security tripling between 2011 and 2021.⁴¹

Rather than emphasizing “development first” or stressing the importance of “developmental peace” as a paradigm for stabilizing international relations, the PRC’s foreign policy today exhibits a growing tendency toward securitization, and this extends to conflict prevention norms. The launch by Xi Jinping of a campaign for the GSI, billed as a new security order that is based on a “comprehensive” and “indivisible” concept of international security, exemplifies this shift. Beijing promotes the GSI as “another global public good” from China, bringing “Chinese solutions and wisdom for solving security challenges facing humanity.”⁴² China utilizes platforms such as summits among the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), the SCO, and the LMC to encourage countries in China’s periphery and the Global South to

“operationalize the GSI and bring more stability and positive energy to the world.”⁴³

Importantly, whether emphasizing development or security, PRC structural approaches to conflict prevention tend to favor the prerogatives of existing governments, including when the preferences of those regimes run contrary to concerns over good governance, transparency, accountability, social inclusion, democratic norms, and human rights.⁴⁴

Today, China’s conflict prevention activities are not limited to conceptual campaigns, regional dialogues, or structural approaches that promote development and economic ties as ways to reduce the risk of conflict. China has also expanded its operational role in conflict prevention through multilateral organizations as well as through bilateral cooperation activities. These include such activities as the provision of mediation services, military assistance, and arms sales, as well as counterterrorism programs and law enforcement training.⁴⁵ Notably, China’s activities on mediation have included the establishment of the Preparatory Office of the International Organization for Mediation (IOMed) in Hong Kong in February 2023.⁴⁶ China proposed the IOMed as the “first intergovernmental legal organization dedicated to resolving international disputes through mediation.” Signatories of the Joint Statement on the Establishment of the International Organization for Mediation include Algeria, Belarus, Cambodia, Djibouti, Indonesia, Laos, Pakistan, Serbia, and Sudan.⁴⁷

Case Studies



The three case studies in this section illustrate how China has sought to take on a greater role in conflict prevention. These cases show China's activities at the systemic, structural, and operational levels of conflict prevention and provide a diverse range of examples, from funding projects through the United Nations to activities within regional multilateral organizations to bilateral cooperation. Taken together, the cases offer new insights into China's evolving approach to conflict prevention norms and the channels through which they are promoted and diffused.

CHINA'S UN PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT TRUST FUND

In 2015, Xi Jinping announced the creation of a 10-year, \$1 billion trust fund for the United Nations to support its peace and development work. This pledge was part of a set of commitments made to the United Nations by China on the occasion of the organization's 70th anniversary aimed at "fulfilling [China's] duties as a major country and providing global development with public goods."⁴⁸ The United Nations Peace and Development Trust Fund (UNPDF) was formally established in 2016 with a scaled-down commitment of \$200 million over 10 years.⁴⁹ The PRC-financed fund had by 2020 invested approximately \$100 million in nearly 100 projects that support the United Nations' work in areas such as peacekeeping, preventive diplomacy, poverty reduction, and development.⁵⁰

A steering committee advises the UN secretary-general on the UNPDF and oversees its management and administration. The committee's functions include outlining the overall priorities for the fund, deciding on funding of projects, and overseeing and evaluating the funded projects. The steering committee is chaired by the chef de cabinet of the secretary-general. Importantly, the

other four members of the steering committee are all PRC officials: China's ambassador to the United Nations, the under-secretary-general of the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs (since 2007, this post has been held by a PRC national), a director-general-level official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and a director-general-level official from the Ministry of Finance.⁵¹

The UNPDF has two subfunds. One, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Sub-Fund, aims to support activities for the achievement of the United Nations' sustainable development goals as put forth in 2015. The other, the Secretary-General's Peace and Security Sub-Fund (PSS), supports UN agencies concerned with peace and security, and is the focus of the following analysis.⁵²

As of June 2023, data was available only for PSS projects conducted between 2016 and 2020. Over those five years, the PSS provided a total of \$36.5 million across 61 projects. During that period, the agency receiving funding for the largest number of projects (19 out of 61) was the Department of Peace Operations. Next were the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (9 projects), the Executive Office of the Secretary-General (8), the Office of Counter-Terrorism (5), and the Office on Drugs and Crime (5). Other organizations supported included the Office of the Special Envoy for the Great Lakes (3) and the Office of Disarmament Affairs (2). The three biggest grants thus far, all over \$2 million, have gone to support counterterrorism activities. The next largest, at \$1.9 million, has gone to the Office of the Special Envoy for the Great Lakes to support the implementation in 2021 and 2022 of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Region. A sampling of funded projects is shown on page 11.

EXAMPLES OF PROJECTS FUNDED BY THE SECRETARY-GENERAL'S PEACE AND SECURITY SUB-FUND

In 2015, Xi Jinping announced the creation of a 10-year, \$1 billion trust fund for the United Nations to support its peace and development work. The United Nations Peace and Development Trust Fund (UNPDF) was formally established in 2016 with a scaled-down commitment of \$200 million over 10 years. The China-financed fund had by 2020 invested approximately \$100 million in nearly 100 projects that support the United Nations' work. The Secretary-General's Peace and Security Sub-Fund of the UNPDF supports UN agencies concerned with peace and security. Statements by Chinese officials regularly link it to the country's larger strategic initiatives and messaging.

- Improving the safety and security of peacekeepers (2017–18)
- Designing and developing a systemwide integrated planning training curriculum for UN peace operations (2017–19)
- Providing crisis management training for UN security officers (2018–19)
- Strengthening regional operational analysis for peacekeeping in the Middle East and North Africa region and in the Horn of Africa and Sudan and South Sudan (2018–19)
- Supporting Southern Africa Development Community countries to strengthen rule of law–based criminal justice measures for preventing and countering terrorism and violent extremism (2018–20)
- Training and certification of UN-formed police units (2018–19)
- Revising UN military unit manuals (2018–21)
- Preventing conflict in the Great Lakes region through strengthening the rule of law (2019)
- Supporting innovative approaches to conflict prevention, mediation, and peacebuilding (2020–21)
- Strengthening peacekeeping capacity, with a focus on Africa (2021)
- Strengthening conflict prevention, regional analysis, and coordination in the Sahel (2020–21)
- Strengthening the capacity and activities of the Secretary-General's High-Level Advisory Board on Mediation (2021–22)
- Improving performance through capacity development of police-contributing countries (2020–23)

Trust fund mechanisms, it should be stressed, are not unusual within the UN system. Even so, the PSS is notable for at least four reasons.

First, China's support for this effort should be seen within the larger context of Beijing's aim to have a greater voice within the UN system, especially with regard to security affairs. This ambition is consistent with China's broader global strategy to reshape how the international community defines the concept of security and to change how that community thinks regional security should be maintained and, when needed, restored.

Since the fund's establishment, statements by PRC officials regularly link it to the country's larger strategic initiatives and messaging. An early assessment of the UNPDF in the *China Daily* quotes a number of PRC officials who argue that the work of the fund supports the BRI and China's commitments to an active role for the United Nations in international security affairs.⁵³ Praising the fund's achievements in 2020 at a conference commemorating the fifth anniversary of its establishment, Zhang Jun noted how the fund helps demonstrate China's role as a supporter of world peace, global development, and the multilateral world order.⁵⁴ In another example, in a speech to African officials under the banner of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, then foreign minister Wang Yi associated his hope that Africa would support the GSI with China's continuing support for the UNPDF and its contributions to peace and stability in Africa.⁵⁵

PRC financing also provides much-needed support for UN activities that might not otherwise receive funding through the main UN budget or other sources. Such largesse presumably garners China political goodwill within much of the UN system. The official PRC summation of the fund's fifth-anniversary commemorative conference emphasized the benefits it brings to the UN system and to its efforts to fulfill the mandate to

promote peace and security, in the process promoting cooperation among and delivering tangible benefits to member states, especially in Africa.⁵⁶ That said, some observers have raised concerns about the fund, arguing that it "bypasses the common pots of UN funding and channels millions of dollars every year directly from Beijing to the executive office of the UN Secretary-General." By doing so, this analysis continues, the fund is thereby "translated into a stronger UN commitment to the goals and activities of China."⁵⁷

Another benefit for Beijing may be that oversight of the spending offers opportunities for closer understanding of ongoing UN activities in the security sphere, increased recognition of their strengths and weaknesses, and heightened awareness of how they might be reformed and refocused.

The second notable aspect of the PSS is that much of the support it provides goes to UN training and capacity-building activities, particularly through the Department of Peace Operations, the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, and the Executive Office of the Secretary-General. These three parts of the United Nations received support for 36 projects over the first five years of the PSS, or nearly 60 percent of the projects supported over that period. This proportion reflects the priorities set out in the administrative agreement between the United Nations and the PRC that governs the fund, the first four of which are mediation, preventive diplomacy, peacekeeping, and reduction of armed conflicts.⁵⁸

Third, the African region has been the primary beneficiary of the PSS's support. The guidelines for applications for PSS support note the importance the fund places on developing peacekeeping capacity building with a focus on Africa; on partnering with regional organizations, particularly the African Union; and on enhancing the strategic planning of peace operations, including through improved operational awareness in the Horn of Africa, the

The significant and ongoing investment made by China in [the Secretary-General’s Peace and Security Sub-Fund] indicates its increasing interest in engaging within the UN system to become a more influential player in regional security affairs, especially in matters of conflict reduction, preventive diplomacy, peacekeeping, and mediation.

Sahel, West Africa, and North Africa, as well as in the Middle East.⁵⁹ The PSS’s prioritization of mediation, preventive diplomacy, and peacekeeping capacities in Africa reflects Beijing’s deepening political, diplomatic, security, and economic interests in the region, including as a major provider of UN peacekeeping forces in Africa, and its increasing involvement in mediation and preventive diplomacy efforts in conflict areas on the continent, especially in the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa.

A fourth reason concerns how the work of the PSS also reflects a strong interest in countering terrorism and certain criminal activities related to terrorism, especially in Africa. The fund’s application guidelines list counterterrorism and cybersecurity as the two other priority areas for support in addition to fostering broader objectives of peace and security. In particular, the guidelines note the importance of countering the use of the internet by terrorists and addressing the challenge of returning foreign fighters.⁶⁰ Between 2016 and 2020, the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime each received PSS funding for five projects, and the three largest grants from the fund, each over \$2 million, went to counterterrorism projects. Interestingly, projects conducted by the UNODC included efforts to apply and strengthen rule-of-law–based approaches to preventing terrorism, violent extremism, illicit trafficking, and other organized crime activities.⁶¹ Support for these activities appears to reflect Beijing’s concern about the continuing security threats posed by terrorist and other criminal organizations, especially in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, and may be linked to China’s preoccupation with potential terrorist activities within its borders and its efforts to garner international support for its response.

It is important to note that it is difficult to discern the influence Beijing may or may not have in shaping the normative approaches and procedural outcomes of the projects supported by the PSS. Presumably, the UN entities that seek this support make their own decisions and consider their own organizational interests when conducting these projects. In addition, the descriptions of the projects made available to the public provide minimal detail about them and do not include the original project proposals or other information, such as progress reports or post-project evaluations. Also, the publicly available information on the PSS does not reveal which project proposals were rejected, if any. Nonetheless, the significant and ongoing investment made by China in this initiative indicates its increasing interest in engaging within the UN system to become a more influential player in regional security affairs, especially in matters of conflict reduction, preventive diplomacy, peacekeeping, and mediation.

CHINA’S USE OF REGIONAL GROUPINGS

For China, regional multilateral groupings beyond the United Nations have also provided important forums within which to begin to articulate and test its preferred approaches to conflict prevention in regional contexts. Moreover, it uses what might be called “Sinocentric multilaterals”—regional groupings that Beijing played a significant role in forming and in which it exercises a leadership role—to facilitate the process of regional coalition building, including creating support for its preferred norms and practices. Beijing can rally this regionally garnered support to promote norms at international organizations, such as the United Nations and other multilateral forums. China has found both the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building



The Shanghai Cooperation Organization held a foreign ministers' meeting in Goa, India, on May 4, 2023. The SCO serves as a critical platform for China's promotion of its preferred norms and approaches for preventing conflict to a widening group of member states. (Photo by Manish Swarup/AP)

Measures in Asia, two intergovernmental organizations in Asia with missions prioritizing regional security, particularly receptive to its efforts in this regard. One preliminary study of China's role in shaping the SCO's agenda, and which compares SCO treaties and Chinese policy documents, contends that "Chinese foreign policy objectives ultimately drive the SCO's policy goals."⁶²

As is clear from the SCO's name, China is not only a founding member but also a leader of the organization. It was formed in 2002 in conjunction with Russia, as well as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, and it initially focused on promoting cooperation against terrorism, separatism, and extremism. India and Pakistan joined the SCO in 2017; and in September 2022, at the SCO's Samarkand Summit,

the grouping expanded further with the signing of a memorandum of obligations for Iran's membership and the start of Belarus's formal pursuit of full membership status. Previously, both countries were observer states within the SCO, along with Afghanistan and Mongolia. According to the PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, an agreement was reached to admit Bahrain, Kuwait, Maldives, Myanmar, and United Arab Emirates as SCO dialogue partners, while Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia were formally granted dialogue partner status.⁶³ Other dialogue partners include Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Turkey. The SCO's full members alone collectively account for more than 40 percent of the world's population and 20 percent of global gross domestic product. Four members are among the world's eight declared nuclear powers.

Promoting China's Security Norms and Practices

The SCO has provided a crucial mechanism for Beijing as it has grown more confident in its capabilities to improve security and pursue other national interests beyond its western borders in Asia, including maintaining good relations with Moscow in post-Soviet Central Asia and securing flows of energy through pipelines from Central Asia and beyond. It has also used the SCO platform to seek support for its policies in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, which include a “counter-extremism” campaign that has targeted the Uyghur population and other Muslim minority groups. China seeks to shape the SCO’s development to embody China’s vision of an alternative approach to regional security that differs from military-centered alliances “directed against third parties.”⁶⁴ Beijing may exert unique influence on the SCO as the top contributor to its budget, having contributed \$85 billion to the SCO by 2021, according to an essay on the evolution of the SCO by a senior analyst at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ CIIS research institute.⁶⁵ Prominent Chinese scholar Jia Qingguo has described the SCO as “China’s experiment in multilateral leadership.”⁶⁶ Numerous academic studies by Chinese and international experts examining the SCO from its inception have made the case that it is by design a key channel for the transmission of norms by both China and Russia. Moreover, substantial research has shown how China and Russia—the two major sources of funding for the SCO—have used the grouping to normalize principles, concepts, and values supportive of authoritarian regime survival.⁶⁷

With respect to conflict prevention, China has promoted through the SCO an approach that spans both structural and operational dimensions. The CIIS essay mentioned above describes China’s relationship to the SCO, along with Russia’s, as that of an “engine” with “leadership and demonstration roles.” The essay highlights several approaches to “ensuring regional security and stability” by “addressing both symptoms and root causes.” In addition to boosting economic integration and encouraging

people-to-people ties through state-sanctioned channels, other approaches include putting “high pressure on the ‘three evil forces’” (terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism) and

encourag[ing] internal and external interactions, build[ing] a firewall against international Islamic extremist forces, support[ing] member states’ efforts to maintain domestic stability, construct[ing] a barrier to prevent the infiltration of ‘color revolution,’ and adopt[ing] comprehensive measures to enhance member states’ capacity to ensure the security of lives and properties of other member states in their territory.⁶⁸

In addition, the CIIS essay emphasizes China’s efforts to “vigorously advocat[e]” the “Shanghai spirit,” referenced in the SCO’s founding declaration.⁶⁹ The Shanghai spirit is a vision for a collective regional identity based on a shared commitment to principles and national priorities such as noninterference in international relations and the fundamental importance of domestic stability and development for both national and international security.⁷⁰

Promoting Normative Preferences through Other Multilateral Partners

Through promoting relationships between the SCO and other major multilateral organizations, above all the United Nations, China has used its international influence to expand the SCO’s policy impact and legitimacy at the international level, including on security- and conflict-related issues. According to the SCO website, the UN General Assembly has regularly adopted resolutions on “cooperation between the United Nations and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization” that stress the importance of greater consultation, cooperation, and coordination.⁷¹ A UN General Assembly resolution in December 2010 noted that the SCO “has become an essential regional organization for addressing security in the region in all its dimensions”; recognized SCO activities “aimed at strengthening peace, security and stability in the region, countering terrorism, separatism and extremism, drug trafficking and other types of criminal activity”; and encouraged all elements of the UN system to deepen

their engagement with the SCO.⁷² Through such activities, China and the other SCO members seek to both raise the international profile of the SCO and strengthen the international legitimacy of the norms it embodies.

China has reinforced preferences articulated in the SCO through other regional organizations as well. Key among SCO regional partners are the CICA, the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the Economic Cooperation Organization. Among these groupings, the CICA has proved particularly amenable to Beijing's security-related concepts and preferences. The idea for the CICA was first articulated by the president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who in 1992 presented a vision for an organization in Asia analogous to the OSCE. It had 15 member states at the time of its establishment in 1999; today, 28 member states form its core, and nine states have observer status, making it the largest multilateral organization based in Asia.⁷³ According to its charter, the Almaty Act, the CICA has a mission of promoting "peace, security and stability in Asia."⁷⁴ Core principles as articulated in the charter and other key documents include the indivisibility of security, joint actions and coordinated responses to threats, and a commitment to mutually beneficial interactions between states of all sizes.⁷⁵

The SCO and the CICA signed a memorandum of understanding formalizing their relationship in 2014. The SCO website notes that the two organizations "take similar approaches to today's fundamental issues, such as settling regional conflicts, strengthening core non-proliferation regimes, and searching for joint responses to the current challenges, such as terrorism, separatism, extremism, drug trafficking, transnational crime, and arms trafficking."⁷⁶ China has used opportunities such as its chairmanship of the CICA from 2014 to 2016 to incorporate its preferred language and concepts into CICA documents.⁷⁷ In 2014, at the Fourth CICA Summit, Xi Jinping proposed a "New Asian Security Concept" based on "common, comprehensive, cooperative and

sustainable security."⁷⁸ Although the exact term "New Asian Security Concept" was not formally adopted by the CICA's members, the summit declaration that year wholly incorporated Xi's own terminology, stating that the CICA "should seek common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustained security"; similar language also appeared in the Fifth CICA Summit Declaration in 2019.⁷⁹ According to Qiang Xiaoyun of the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, China's greatest contribution to the CICA has been shaping and improving the organization's security concepts.⁸⁰

It is difficult to assess the impact of China's insertion of its preferred concepts into the CICA's outcome documents. Indeed, one document (the "Chairmanship's Conclusions," discussed below), issued after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, suggests that some member states give only a qualified acceptance to some of China's concepts and that some other states may openly disagree with Beijing's vision for Asian security. Nevertheless, Beijing has pushed hard to have favorable conceptual language included in CICA documents. In an example, in June 2022, SCO secretary-general Zhang Ming visited the CICA Secretariat, where he underscored the extent to which the goals of the SCO and the CICA overlap, referencing the 2014 SCO and CICA secretariats' memorandum of understanding, and called for an even stronger CICA-SCO partnership.⁸¹ In another example, remarks delivered at the CICA's October 2022 summit in Astana, Kazakhstan, then Politburo Standing Committee member and PRC vice president Wang Qishan highlighted China's new GSI and Global Development Initiative. Wang also underscored the need to "pursue common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security."⁸² These concepts were articulated in a key outcome document from the summit, the "Chairmanship's Conclusions on Achievements and Discussions of the Sixth CICA Summit."

Notably, the 2022 summit did not produce a declaration but rather resulted in a shorter "Astana Statement" and the longer "Chairmanship's Conclusions." The latter

Chinese influence in the security sector of Central Asian states has been rising. At the May 2023 China-Central Asia Summit, Xi asserted that China is “ready to help Central Asian countries improve their law enforcement, security, and defense capability construction.”

focuses on member states’ positions that were not agreed to by all. The “Conclusions” document includes references to Chinese concepts, stating, for example, that “the People’s Republic of China, the Russian Federation and certain other Member States share the understanding that security is common, comprehensive, cooperative, sustainable, indivisible and equal.”⁸³ It also records the view that “the People’s Republic of China and certain other Member States recognize the positive role of the Global Security Initiative in bridging the peace and security deficit.”⁸⁴

China’s Financial and Technical Support for the SCO

China promotes its conflict prevention preferences through the provision of financial and technical support for SCO activities. For example, China’s support has been vital to the development of the SCO’s Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS). Along with Moscow, Beijing has contributed the highest share of financial support for RATS activities, including support for establishing its international intelligence database.

Beyond RATS, Beijing offers other forms of support to increase SCO members’ capacity to prevent the emergence of potential security threats. During Xi Jinping’s visit to Samarkand for the SCO heads of state meeting in September 2022, for example, the Chinese leader highlighted the dangers of externally driven color revolutions led by “terrorist and extremist forces” and aimed at destabilizing established governments and disrupting regional security. Xi also called for expanded security cooperation against color revolutions and “interference in other countries’ internal affairs under any pretext” through the implementation of China’s GSI.⁸⁵

In addition, Xi urged SCO member states to continue conducting joint anti-terrorism exercises and to toughen

their capabilities to counter separatism, extremism, drug trafficking, and cybercrimes. Specifically, he called for expanded law enforcement cooperation among member states and extended an offer to provide Chinese training to 2,000 law enforcement personnel from SCO member states, as well as to establish a China-SCO training base for counterterrorism personnel.⁸⁶ At the July 2023 SCO heads-of-state meeting, Xi called for the upgrading of SCO security cooperation, emphasizing the need for cooperation on transnational issues as well as expansion into nontraditional fields, including digital, biological, and outer space security.⁸⁷ China has also encouraged the harmonization of national legislation by SCO member states to better confront such security challenges, including promising to assist with setting up a training center for judicial exchanges among SCO members.⁸⁸

Such financial and technical support to enhance the domestic security apparatuses of Central Asian states is not novel. For decades, China has engaged bilaterally with several SCO member states on border security, anti-terrorism, transnational crime, intelligence sharing, and military training. However, Chinese influence in the security sector of Central Asian states has been rising. At the May 2023 China-Central Asia Summit, Xi asserted that China is “ready to help Central Asian countries improve their law enforcement, security, and defense capability construction.”⁸⁹ A few weeks later, in June 2023, Kyrgyz Interior Ministry representatives went to Xinjiang, where they reportedly received a tutorial from Chinese officials on crowd control and “anti-terrorist” crackdowns, studied “new achievements in the digitalization of the Chinese police,” and signed an agreement for Xinjiang security officials to train Kyrgyz employees of police districts along the China-Kyrgyzstan border.⁹⁰ China has also made loans to enable Central Asian states to acquire its security technology through the SCO, and Chinese facial recognition and artificial

intelligence technology has been widely adopted in Central Asia.⁹¹ The widespread use of Chinese technology combined with Chinese security training programs creates an important channel for the transmission of Chinese conflict prevention norms to Central Asian states and other SCO members and partners.⁹²



The SCO and CICA thus serve as critical platforms for China’s promotion of its preferred norms and approaches for preventing conflict to a widening group of member states. China’s use of these groupings to support proactive conflict prevention by enhancing the capabilities of governments to curb domestic instability is conspicuously on display in Central Asian states. China has expanded its bilateral security cooperation and role in strengthening domestic law enforcement in the region, with its Ministry of Public Security often working with its Central Asian counterparts.⁹³ Other Sinocentric multilaterals beyond the SCO and CICA, such as the LMC grouping, provide similar channels. Last year, for example, China forged an agreement with LMC states to establish a pilot zone for its GSI to “safeguard regional peace and stability.”⁹⁴ Although new, many of these efforts are gaining momentum, particularly as China begins to fill some of the vacuum in Central Asia left by Russia as it focuses on Ukraine, and as China competes for influence as a regional actor in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.⁹⁵

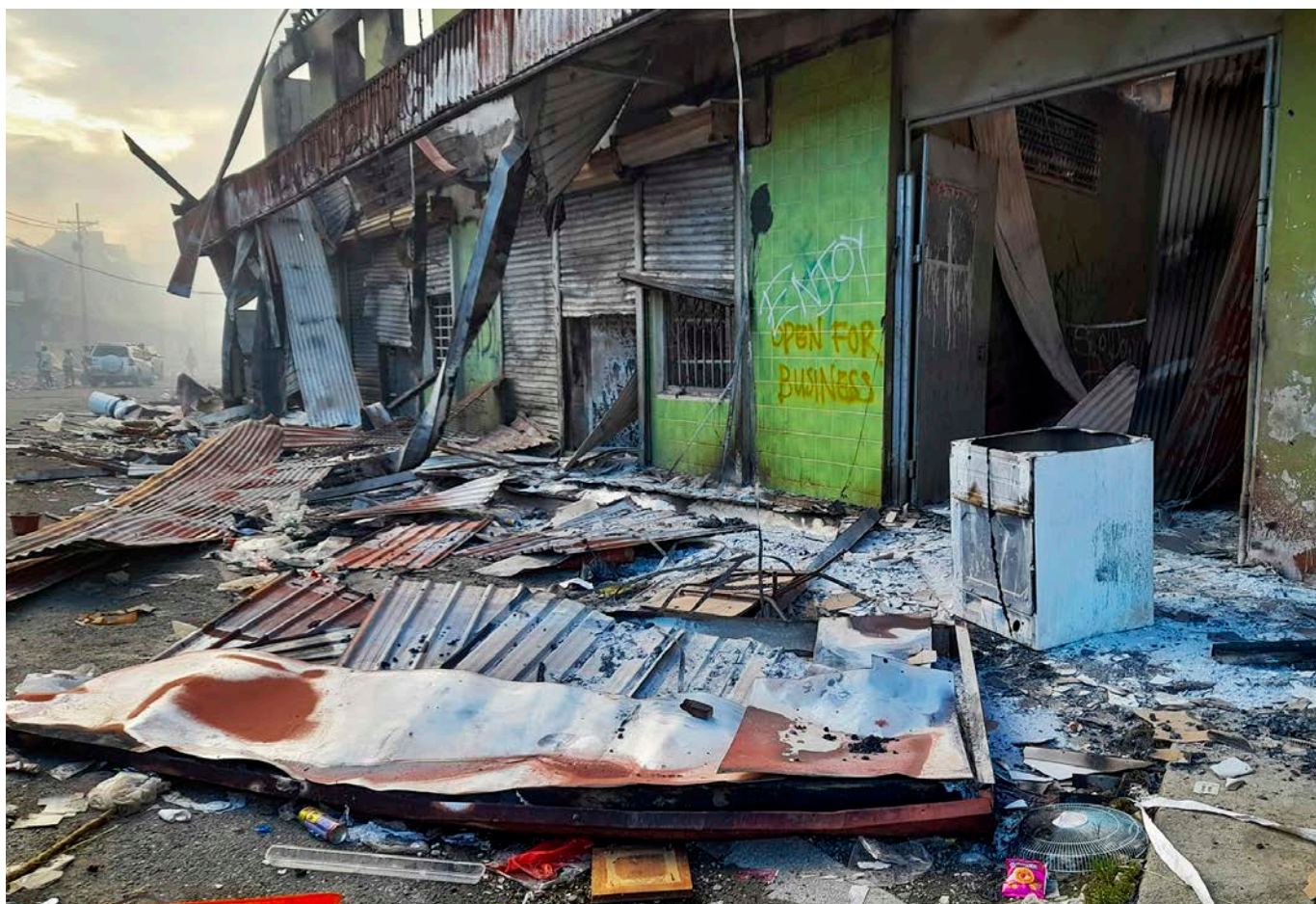
CHINA’S DEEPENING TIES WITH SOLOMON ISLANDS

China’s interest in the Pacific Islands region has steadily grown over the past several decades.⁹⁶ China has been an official dialogue partner of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) since 1989 and in 2000 established the China-PIF Cooperation Fund to encourage trade and investment between China and forum members. The China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum (EDCF) was founded in 2006, and today Beijing provides approximately \$1 million per year to support the EDCF secretariat.⁹⁷ According to

official PRC reporting, trade between China and Pacific Island countries that have diplomatic relations with China expanded more than thirtyfold between 1992 and 2021. Over the same period, China delivered some 500 building projects to those countries, including roads, bridges, hospitals, and stadiums, and trained around 10,000 persons across a variety of professional fields.⁹⁸

Xi Jinping has made two visits to the region—in 2014 and 2018—to meet with his counterparts from countries that have diplomatic ties with China. Since Xi became China’s paramount leader, two Pacific Island countries—Solomon Islands and Kiribati—have switched their diplomatic recognition from the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the People’s Republic of China, and eight countries in the region have become “comprehensive strategic partners” with China, Beijing’s highest category of diplomatic ties.⁹⁹ The 10 Pacific Island countries with which Beijing has diplomatic relations have all signed memorandums of understanding in relation to Xi’s signature diplomatic effort, the BRI. A new initiative, the China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, was first held (virtually) in 2021 and convened in person in 2022.¹⁰⁰ In 2020, the PRC created a \$1.9 million fund to support the COVID response in the region and pledged in 2022 to provide an additional \$2 million.¹⁰¹ It also pledged in 2022 to provide the PIF an additional \$1 million to support its operations.¹⁰²

China has also been active in building up security-related ties in the region. The hospital ship of the People’s Liberation Army Navy, the *Peace Ark* (和平方舟), made port calls in the region in 2014 and 2018, with plans to do so again in 2023. Since 2017, the Ministry of Public Security has convened some 23 capacity-building and training sessions for nearly 500 law enforcement officers from across Pacific Island countries.¹⁰³ It has also been widely reported—though not confirmed officially by Beijing or Pacific Island governments—that China seeks to establish a more permanent military presence in the region, including through the construction of naval facilities.¹⁰⁴



Shops in Chinatown in Honiara, Solomon Islands, are pictured on November 26, 2021, following anti-China riots. Similar rioting took place in 2019, in part in response to Solomon Islands prime minister Manasseh Sogavare's decision to switch diplomatic ties from Taiwan to China. (Photo by Charley Piringi/AP)

In mid-2022, the PRC signaled its intent to further deepen ties in the region. Leveraging a 10-day, eight-country visit to the Pacific Islands region, then foreign minister Wang Yi sought support from his counterparts for a wide-ranging agreement and action plan on “common development.”¹⁰⁵ Although Wang failed to gain buy-in for the proposal from all the countries he visited, draft versions of the agreement and action plan reveal the scale of China’s ambition to play a far greater role in the region in terms of trade, investment, political cooperation and coordination, climate change mitigation, education and training, health care, and security assistance.

Among the security-related principles and next steps proposed, the agreement called for strengthening exchanges to address traditional and nontraditional

security challenges, increasing law enforcement cooperation, and combating transnational crime. China also pledged to continue holding an annual China-Pacific Island foreign ministers meeting, appoint a special envoy for Pacific Island affairs, convene a China-Pacific Islands ministerial dialogue on law enforcement capacity and police cooperation, and provide both bilateral and multilateral mid- and senior-level police training for Pacific Island nations. In November 2022, China and six Pacific Island countries—Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu—held the first ministerial-level dialogue on law enforcement. It was co-chaired by Wang Xiaohong, China’s minister of public security, and Anthony Veke, Solomon Islands’ minister of police, national security, and correctional services, and was attended by the heads of police and

other senior police officials from the other five countries.¹⁰⁶ In February 2023, the former PRC ambassador to Fiji, Qian Bo, was appointed as the government's special envoy for Pacific Island affairs.¹⁰⁷

Placed in this larger context, the security pact reached in early 2022 between China and Solomon Islands (discussed in detail below) should be seen as part—albeit a groundbreaking part—of a larger effort by Beijing to increase its presence as a key player in Pacific Island regional security affairs. This ambition, it should be noted, is not unanimously welcomed in the region. China's efforts there have met with strong criticism, most notably from former president of the Federated States of Micronesia, David Panuelo, who has issued statements expressing concern about the China–Solomon Islands pact, opposing China's proposed regional economic and security agreement, and ultimately denouncing China's "political warfare" activities in the FSM.¹⁰⁸

China–Solomon Islands Pact

Within months of becoming Solomon Islands' prime minister in April 2019, Manasseh Sogavare announced that his country would shift diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC. In October 2019, Sogavare made his first official visit to China, and with diplomatic relations in place, the two countries initiated discussions about deepening ties across a range of bilateral issues, including security cooperation.

The push for stronger security ties gained added momentum with violent protests, escalating into riots, targeting Chinatown in the Solomon Islands capital of Honiara in November 2021. However, this was not the first time that anti-China rioting had broken out in the island nation. Similar rioting took place in 2019, in part in response to Sogavare's decision to switch diplomatic ties from Taiwan to the PRC. In 2006, anti-Chinese unrest also erupted in Honiara following rumors that either Taipei or Beijing paid lawmakers to elect an unpopular prime minister.¹⁰⁹

Following the unrest in November 2021, Australia responded to a request from the Sogavare government to send police, troops, and other supporting officials to help restore order; some 100 Australian police and military personnel arrived by the end of the month. Just a few weeks later, Solomon Islands announced that it had requested and accepted support from the PRC in the form of riot control equipment worth about \$1.5 million and a small number of police liaison officers to strengthen ongoing bilateral police training assistance.¹¹⁰ These personnel and resources arrived in early 2022.

After the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Solomon Islands in 2019, Beijing had already begun providing a modest level of security assistance to Honiara. Behind the scenes, however, plans for a much more ambitious security pact between the two countries were apparently taking place. A document purporting to be a draft version of that pact—leaked to the public in March 2022—outlined a number of ways that China could expand its provision of security assistance to Solomon Islands. The key clauses of the document are the following:

Solomon Islands may, according to its own needs, request China to send police, armed police, military personnel and other law enforcement and other armed forces to Solomon Islands to assist in maintaining social order, protecting people's lives and property, providing humanitarian assistance, carrying out disaster response, or providing assistance on other tasks agreed upon by the Parties; China may, according to its own needs and with the consent of Solomon Islands, make ship visits to, carry out logistical replenishment in, and have stopover and transition in Solomon Islands, and the relevant forces of China can be used to protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects in Solomon Islands.¹¹¹

A few days following these revelations, Prime Minister Sogavare confirmed the agreement's acceptance by both countries. In responding to criticism about the pact, he sought to reassure regional partners by saying that

Solomon Islands' security arrangements with Australia remained in place but that Solomon Islands needed to "diversify" its security relationships. According to Sogavare, "We find it insulting to be branded as unfit to manage our sovereign affairs, and that we have other motives in pursuing our national interests."¹¹² He later declared that the agreement with China does not allow for a Chinese military base in Solomon Islands, adding that Australia would remain Solomon Islands' "partner of choice" and its "first choice" regarding security issues in the region.¹¹³

The PRC confirmed the agreement in mid-April. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' spokesperson, Wang Wenbin, "The two sides will conduct cooperation in such areas as maintenance of social order, protection of the safety of people's lives and property, humanitarian assistance and natural disaster response, in an effort to help Solomon Islands strengthen capacity building in safeguarding its own security."¹¹⁴ The agreement will operate for an initial period of five years, with the possibility of renewal.

In considering this case, several key points emerge regarding China's evolving approach to global conflict prevention norms. First, while China's agreement with Solomon Islands marked a departure for Beijing, signaling its increasing willingness to play a much larger and potentially riskier role in regional security affairs and put its security forces in harm's way, the pact was not an isolated development. Rather, it should be seen as part of an ongoing and larger effort in the Pacific Islands region and elsewhere.

The multilateral proposal and action plan on "common development" put forward by Beijing to its partners among Pacific Island countries in 2022, while not garnering full support among them, nonetheless aims to bolster China's role as a security actor in the region—including in contributing to conflict prevention and stabilization operations. Beijing seems certain to continue to seek support among Pacific Island countries for its increased presence and potential contributions. Its agreement with Solomon

Islands will serve as a test case for how that ambition plays out.

Second, China's approach with Solomon Islands is broadly consistent with initiatives in other parts of the world. In Central Asia and Africa, and via the United Nations Peace and Development Trust Fund, China has ramped up its support for mediation, conflict prevention, and peace-keeping activities. Also consistent with its agreement with Solomon Islands, China's support increasingly entails the export of police training and capacity building as well as the provision of policing and surveillance equipment to foreign partners.

A third point concerns the particular circumstances of China–Solomon Islands relations. Clearly, the two nations were disposed to move quickly in establishing security ties and a formalized framework. The security agreement was concluded within a relatively short period—in just two and a half years following the establishment of diplomatic relations between Honiara and Beijing in September 2019. Opposition leadership in Solomon Islands has claimed that negotiations over the pact were well underway as early as mid-2021.¹¹⁵ Among other motivations, the Sogavare government aimed not only to develop closer ties with China but also to wield the pact as a way to cow domestic political opponents and leverage China's diplomatic competition with Taiwan and Beijing's larger strategic contest with the United States to generate greater benefits for Solomon Islands. For its part, Beijing saw an opportunity to gain a greater strategic foothold in the region.

In addition, the domestic unrest that erupted under Sogavare's rule, some of which targeted Chinatown, was another factor prompting Beijing and Honiara to reach an agreement. According to the leader of the Chinese Police Liaison Team (CPLT) sent to Solomon Islands, the team's arrival in Honiara in early 2022 was linked in part to the need to protect PRC citizens in the country, and the team's work includes providing basic

legal and self-protection training for those individuals. China's party-state outlet the *Global Times* commented that "Chinatown was not only the first stop of the Chinese Police Liaison Team when they arrived in the Solomon Islands . . . but also a reason for them to be in the country."¹¹⁶

Beijing may see the PRC–Solomon Islands security agreement as an opportunity to experiment, on a small scale, with a solution to the problem of safeguarding its citizens, an issue of growing concern for Chinese leaders and the Chinese public.¹¹⁷ Concerns in Beijing about the safety of Chinese citizens abroad had been mounting for more than a decade before the agreement—and especially since 2011, when, with the collapse of stability in Libya prior to the NATO intervention, China extracted no fewer than 36,000 Chinese citizens who were living and working in the country.¹¹⁸

Security Cooperation in Operation

As of this writing, China and Solomon Islands are actively cooperating on security matters and conflict prevention, most notably in the area of police training and capacity building. The CPLT continues its in-country work and provides equipment and training to help build the capacity of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF). According to the CPLT's commander, the team's purpose is to "promote public order management and riot control, maintain social stability [and] protect the lives and property of local and foreign friends in Solomon Islands."¹¹⁹

Other ongoing or recent projects include a five-month police training course that ran in Solomon Islands from March to August 2022; the construction of a digital mobile radio communication system in Honiara; the provision of a forensic autopsy laboratory; and the connection of the RSIPF to Interpol's I-24/7 web-based global police communications system. Through these various projects, the CPLT provided training for some

400 RSIPF officers; as of late 2022, the cost of the CPLT's programs was estimated to be around \$4.9 million.¹²⁰

An important element of this support has included training in China. Thirty-two RSIPF officers spent a month in China in October and early November 2022, their training facilitated by the Fujian Police College. This marked the first time that RSIPF personnel had trained in China; it was also the largest RSIPF delegation ever to travel abroad for training.¹²¹ The training covered subjects such as unarmed and armed tactics, VIP protection techniques, and large-scale event planning and crowd control, and included visits to police stations, operations centers, and training facilities.¹²²

These cooperative programs look set to continue and will likely remain focused on mitigating and responding to local unrest and other security challenges. In speaking about Chinese support for the RSIPF, the deputy commissioner of the force declared in June 2022, "The security challenges are evolving and still out there threatening this nation and therefore RSIPF must be well prepared to tackle these threats. That is why these trainings [by the CPLT] are critical and must be delivered to reach all RSIPF officers in Honiara and the provinces."¹²³

Notably, this particular area of bilateral cooperation received an added boost during the visit of Prime Minister Sogavare to Beijing in July 2023. In a joint statement coming out of the visit, the two states announced they would "enhance cooperation on law enforcement and security matters" and that the PRC "will continue to provide support and help to Solomon Islands as needed in strengthening Solomon Islands' police law enforcement capacity." As part of Sogavare's visit, Beijing and Honiara signed a new agreement on "police cooperation," although its contents were not disclosed.¹²⁴

Conclusion and Recommendations



China's increasing efforts to promote its image and norms in relation to conflict prevention at systemic, structural, and operational levels have important implications for Beijing's future role as an international security actor. They also seem certain to affect US interests and thus call for adjustments in US policy.

The first point to make about Beijing's changing role on the international security stage is that China's evolving approach to conflict prevention should be taken seriously. Broadly speaking, China's approach to conflict prevention reflects and is part of a larger, increasingly proactive strategic effort to exert greater influence on the maintenance and restoration of security and stability across the globe. China wants to reshape conflict prevention to align more closely with its normative preferences and national interests.

Because of this, there is a consistent thread running through China's systemic undertakings, such as the Global Security Initiative and its activities within the UN system, through its efforts to influence structural approaches in various multilateral settings, and extending down to operational, on-the-ground policy and action in relation to conflict prevention. There is an internal connectivity and logic to China's approach, which appears carefully constructed and persistently pursued. Through initiatives such as the GSI, the UN Secretary-General's Peace and Security Sub-Fund, and the deployment of special envoys, Beijing has taken steps to put its words into action. Importantly, these efforts in relation to conflict prevention are also conduits through which China can promote its

worldviews, socialize its preferred understanding of the sources of conflict and how to mitigate them, and positively contrast those views against practices China pointedly describes as "Western."

Second, and related, China seeks to legitimize this strategy both bilaterally and through intergovernmental organizations. China seeks to promote its preferred approaches to conflict prevention through intergovernmental organizations, including the United Nations and others at the regional level in which China is recognized as a leading actor. These include such groupings as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, the China-Arab Summit, ongoing China-African Union engagement, and, as discussed above, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, and PRC-Pacific Islands cooperation. China seeks to win recognition, endorsement, and acceptance of its preferences from these partnerships in order to confer international legitimacy on its preferred norms and strengthen alignment with its national interests. China characterizes its vision and practices on security and conflict prevention as "global public goods" drawn from its own experience and "wisdom."¹²⁵

Third, the PRC has traditionally viewed economic development as the most important factor in achieving stability and preventing conflict, but this attitude has begun to change. This shift may have started as early as 2014, shortly after Xi Jinping came to power. PRC foreign policy, broadly speaking, is undergoing a process of securitization, and conflict prevention norms are not immune

from this turn away from the old mantra of “development first” and “developmental peace.”

This is consistent with the shift in China’s domestic policy thinking, which has increasingly raised the salience of “security first” as a means to ensure stability and prosperity. In turn, it appears this framework for addressing potential internal tensions and instabilities is being exported both in rhetoric and action at the systemic, structural, and operational levels. Examples include the expanding provision of police training and capacity building, policing equipment, surveillance technology and—such as in the case of Solomon Islands and with some of China’s SCO partners—offers of security force training and the deployment of Chinese soldiers and police as a means to maintain order and mitigate conflict.¹²⁶

A fourth point concerns China’s engagement with nongovernmental entities as part of its approach to conflict prevention. China’s efforts to shape conflict prevention norms focus almost exclusively on government-to-government engagement, either bilaterally or multilaterally. What appears to be China’s increasingly security-first approach to conflict prevention leaves less room in the PRC calculus for engagement with community organizations, opposition or rival parties, or relevant domestic and international nongovernmental organizations as part of a holistic conflict prevention process.¹²⁷ Indeed, some elements of a security-first approach could either implicitly or explicitly target such organizations in the name of establishing stability and order.

This aspect of China’s approach to conflict prevention also mirrors the country’s intolerance at home of organized, independent political forces and the operation of autonomous nongovernmental organizations or community groups that are neither approved nor overseen by the Communist Party. Indeed, as illustrated in the case study on regional groupings, a central element of China’s approach to internal security and conflict prevention is to suppress the

emergence of any independent opposition to established regimes—couched in the language of stopping terrorism, separatism, and extremism. As one scholar put it, “For China, ‘conflict prevention’ mostly means ‘color revolution prevention.’”¹²⁸ It is also important to note that this tendency to exclude nongovernmental entities runs directly counter to efforts by the United Nations and other members of the international community, including the United States, to promote greater inclusivity in conflict prevention endeavors through the engagement of actors outside the standing government that have a stake in the achievement of peace.

A final point has to do with China’s engagement across the conflict curve (see figure 1 on page 5). Over the past two decades, China has shown increasing willingness and capacity to engage across many more phases of conflict and peace depicted in the conflict curve. For example, China has pursued a greater role in mediating both international and internal conflicts and for more than a decade has been a leading actor among UN Security Council members in international peacekeeping.¹²⁹

THE FUTURE OF CHINA’S CONFLICT PREVENTION EFFORTS

Looking ahead to the next 5 to 10 years, China is likely to devote even greater resources to the left side of that curve: systemic and structural norm-shaping activities, plus operational activities such as preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention. At least three principal reasons make this probable.

First, to the degree China has engaged on the right side of the conflict curve, it has done so primarily under the auspices of the United Nations by performing its role as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, contributing to UN peacekeeping forces, and having PRC officials serve as UN-designated special envoys and mediators. In doing so, it remains constricted within the UN system and entangled by the heightened great power rivalries—especially its own with Washington—that fundamentally affect its freedom of maneuver within



Permanent Representative of China to the United Nations Zhang Jun speaks during a Security Council meeting at United Nations headquarters in New York on June 6, 2023. China seeks to diffuse its conflict prevention approach through intergovernmental organizations, including the United Nations and regional bodies in which China plays a leading role. (Photo by Yuki Iwamura/AP)

the world body. This constriction is especially tight on matters of international security, where the United States and its allies retain a powerful normative and institutional influence. Beijing has become increasingly disaffected with what it sees as a Western-dominated approach within the United Nations to resolving international conflicts. In contrast, on the left side of the curve, Beijing is less constrained and can operate outside the UN system—unilaterally, bilaterally, and multilaterally—to pursue its normative and strategic interests in relation to conflict prevention.

Second, the PRC today and for the foreseeable future will remain generally reluctant—as a matter of both political will and military capability—to deploy security forces abroad in peace enforcement, peacekeeping, and postconflict peacebuilding roles outside of a UN mandate to do so. Instead, China is far more likely to increase its willingness and capacity to take less

politically and operationally risky steps on the left side of the conflict curve.

That said, the agreement with Solomon Islands appears to mark a turning point for China. The overseas deployment of Chinese security personnel outside of UN operations has grown in recent years, often as part of bilateral or multilateral law enforcement activities focused on combating terrorism and crime, extraditing Chinese citizens, and protecting Chinese citizens abroad.¹³⁰ In contrast, the leaked agreement between Beijing and Honiara goes beyond this by including a provision for China “to assist in maintaining social order,” thereby providing a potential mandate for Chinese security forces to keep a foreign government in power. Also notable is the explicit listing of “police, armed police and military personnel” as security forces that China can send. The People’s Armed Police, a paramilitary force with a primary mission of maintaining China’s domestic stability,

has been involved in UN peacekeeping missions and joint counterterrorism initiatives with neighboring states. However, deploying this force overseas to protect a sitting government would be unprecedented.¹³¹ Yet how the agreement is implemented remains to be seen. It should also be noted that the actual deployment of armed PRC personnel in Solomon Islands could well generate greater anger and unrest in the island nation, not less.

Third, and related to the first two points, China's greatest strengths can be more readily applied across the left side of the conflict curve. These strengths include the ability to shape diplomatic norms at the systemic level and to engage politically and deploy economic incentives at the structural level. It also includes the provision of "soft security" resources at the operational level—such as security forces training, equipment, and surveillance capabilities. These soft security resources may be distinguished from the use of military force itself in conflict prevention activities. China's official security policy includes a role for the Chinese military in "maintain[ing] regional and world peace," and China's military operations include military diplomacy and other so-called military operations other than war. However, its military has not played a role in conflict prevention as special operations forces from other countries have—though, as noted above, the agreement with Solomon Islands could signal change ahead.¹³²

These developments have important implications for China, for the United Nations, and for the international system, including the United States. China is likely to continue its effort to positively differentiate its approach to international security from Western, and particularly US, approaches, including with regard to conflict prevention. Within the United Nations, China will continue to leverage its political and economic influence among member states, especially those from the Global South, to promote its approach to conflict prevention. The international community, especially within the Global South, should expect Beijing to increase its bilateral and

multilateral efforts through Sinocentric organizations and other key partnerships to promote its norms and interests in relation to conflict prevention.

IMPLICATIONS FOR US POLICY

China's strategic efforts to play a larger role in global conflict prevention activities are already reshaping established conflict prevention norms. This has immediate relevance in light of the Ukraine conflict. Although detailed discussion of these efforts in relation to Russian hostilities against Ukraine is beyond the scope of this study, it is clear in the timing alone that China is using the conflict in Ukraine to amplify its calls for a new security order in the form of its GSI. The structural and operational implications of China's alternate vision of a global security order could include a widening acceptance of China's preferred methods of conflict prevention, from an emphasis on "developmental peace," particularly through the large-scale, generally state-led infrastructure projects that epitomize China's BRI, to a focus on domestic security aimed at strengthening the capacity of the state to reduce instability at home. The latter in its current form prioritizes building stronger domestic policing and surveillance capabilities, areas the PRC has emphasized at home, as well as promoting cooperation among regional states to reduce challenges from nonstate actors to state authority. The impact of these interconnected efforts could be to reduce threats to security from malign nonstate actors, such as transnational terrorists. But another effect might be a reduction in opportunities for nongovernmental actors to engage in activities such as holding peaceful protests and advocating for civic interests that are strongly associated with human security.

To respond to these emerging challenges, the United States should consider policy actions in five areas.

First, given that matters related to regional instability and global security have become central to China's multilateral and bilateral diplomacy, relevant US agencies—including the Department of State, the

Department of Defense, and intelligence agencies—should devote greater resources to tracking and analyzing the impact of China’s initiatives on international security and global conflict prevention norms and practices.

Second, the findings indicate that China’s approach to conflict prevention focuses heavily on state capacity in the areas of policing and surveillance, instruments of social control it has developed at home, with its international policy energy and resources on conflict prevention channeled to these areas. Greater resources should be allocated to the Department of State, the United States Agency for International Development, and US intelligence agencies to improve their ability to assess the potential impacts of China’s activities in these areas on US security relationships and interests.

Third, China’s influence is growing in the Global South and especially in China’s periphery, where its BRI activities and other commitments of financial resources have increased its stakes in preventive diplomacy and its support for state-strengthening domestic capabilities. Much more diplomatic and financial commitment is needed on the part of the United States to demonstrate the benefits of established approaches to conflict prevention for sustainable peace and human security. Washington should also engage its allies and partners in this effort.

Fourth, China’s initiatives have aspects that are assessed as beneficial by many countries around the world, including some US allies and partners. Washington should respond to China’s activities with policies that deflect unwelcome elements but also identify opportunities to engage with constructive PRC contributions.

Fifth, China’s activities have a coherence that requires a similarly coherent response from the United States. A White House–led effort should fashion a comprehensive US government policy response that is calibrated

to address the current challenge and its evolution, is responsive to the needs of conflict-affected countries, and is flexible enough to address the systemic, structural, and operational dimensions of China’s conflict prevention strategy.

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Looking ahead, Washington should expect Beijing to increase its efforts to play a greater role as a security broker, including but not limited to the area of conflict prevention, in both conflict-prone and conflict-active regions. China’s intention to be a much bigger player in global and regional security affairs, especially in the Global South, underlies numerous high-profile endeavors in recent years. These include China’s investments in the United Nations; its efforts to address instabilities and conflict in places such as Afghanistan, Myanmar, Ukraine, and the Horn of Africa, and in relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia; and the slew of China-led multilateral forums in Africa, with Arab states, in Central Asia, with the BRICS grouping, and elsewhere.

More broadly, China will likely redouble efforts to promote its Global Security Initiative—which “aims to eliminate the root causes of international conflicts, improve global security governance, encourage joint international efforts to bring more stability and certainty to a volatile and changing era, and promote durable peace and development in the world.”¹³³ These efforts will unfailingly try to juxtapose the GSI against what China asserts is the “hegemony” and “Cold War mentality” of US and other Western-led approaches to security and stability. In all of these endeavors, China hopes to build a post–Pax Americana security order conducive to PRC influence and interests.¹³⁴

Notes



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