



Telebriefing:

**ENGAGING CHINA: PEACE, SECURITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN AFRICA**

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**Co-sponsored by the Peace and Security Funders Group and  
the IHRFG-EDGE Asia and Pacific Funders Working Group**

***Speakers:***

- [Bernardo Mariani](#), Programme Manager - China, Saferworld
- [Thomas Wheeler](#), Conflict and Security Advisor, Saferworld
- [Michael Kleinman](#), Director, Investments, Humanity United

***Moderator:***

- [Katherine McGraw](#), Executive Director, Peace and Security Funders Group

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Funders working to promote peace, security and human rights often adopt an inside-outside strategy - supporting both local organizations, as well as efforts to influence international actors such as the UN Security Council, the US Government, or the EU. In many fragile states, China also has tremendous influence. This is especially true in Africa, given the breadth of Chinese investment in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Kenya and Sudan. In the past, however, China has been reluctant to use this leverage.

As the scope of Chinese engagement in Africa continues to grow, the traditional policy of non-interference is proving insufficient. For instance, China has acted to protect its nationals in Libya, and has also tried to avert renewed conflict between Sudan and South Sudan. Does this changing situation present a new opportunity for human rights organizations to engage Chinese policymakers? If so, how can human rights organizations create a constructive dialogue on issues around peace, security and human rights?

Michael Kleinman, Director, Investments, Humanity United

Michael provided an overview of Chinese engagement in conflict-affected states in Africa.

Chinese trade and investment bears growing influence in Africa, particularly in conflict-affected states. China's interests in Africa include:

- Economic:
  - China looks to expand exports to new markets in Africa
  - China depends on Africa's natural resources (oil, minerals, timber, agriculture)
- Political:
  - China wants African nations to recognize Beijing, not Taipei, and seeks their support in international arenas

- China convenes the [Forum on Chinese-African Cooperation](#) (FOCAC) every three years and has highlighted peace and security as priorities
- Over 1500 Chinese civilians and military personnel currently serve in six UN missions (Cote D'Ivoire, Darfur, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, South Sudan, Western Sahara)
- Media:
  - Xinhua, the official news agency, now has over 20 bureaus in Africa

Increased engagement has tested China's policy of non-interference in other nations' affairs. The rhetoric will likely evolve as China interprets non-intervention more flexibly and chooses constructive intervention in certain cases. Chinese priorities themselves are also in flux, balancing agendas from a range of actors struggling to respond to rapidly changing dynamics on the ground.

Five different (and often competing) government entities set policy in Sub-Saharan Africa:

- Ministry of Commerce
- Ministry of Finance
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Export-Import Bank of China (China Ex-Im)
- China Development Bank (CDB)

State-owned enterprises' priorities often conflict with those of government entities. The Communist Party has final say over engagement.

China has historically focused on government-to-government relations, but policymakers have grown concerned about their lack of knowledge about dynamics on the ground. They have begun to build relationships with African stakeholders, both to improve soft power and to hedge against political change.

Chinese think tanks and universities are able to engage with a wider range of African civil society organizations (CSOs), so often act as intermediaries and resources for the Chinese government and companies.

Chinese decision-makers are generally more receptive to ideas originating in the Global South and to discussions framed around "peace, security and stability," rather than "rights."

Bernardo Mariani, Programme Manager - China, Saferworld

Bernardo discussed the strategies and challenges involved when trying to engage with China.

China's growing presence in Africa affects the security of local communities as well as Chinese actors: Chinese companies and peacekeepers have faced violence, kidnappings, and financial losses in conflict-ridden areas. Despite its economic might, China has little experience with on-the-ground challenges in Africa.

China's search for solutions in fragile areas opens windows for constructive engagement on peace, security and human rights. China is not monolithic: though the Communist party rules, there is a plurality of actors operating in Africa with different interests. Saferworld looks for mutually supportive paths of engagement with Chinese actors whose outlooks align with Saferworld's work.

Successful engagement requires time and resources dedicated to analyzing contexts, building relationships and presenting the right message to Chinese actors. The Chinese are open to discussions around peace, security and rights but adopt defensive positions when facing accusatory tones from the West.

Approaches to engagement depend on the type of actor in question:

- Officials:
  - Government entities are more responsive to references to high-priority items on the Chinese agenda
    - One successful example is introducing conflict sensitivity to officials and state-owned enterprises. Conflict-affected areas present risks to China's national interests. As actors on the ground incorporate risk management into their work, they have come to understand it as a tool to promote stability and development
  - China is also open to dialogue surrounding its current international commitments. FOCAC, for example, agreed to an action plan in which China pledged increased support for African peace and security
- Unofficial Actors:
  - Chinese civil society, including think tanks, scholars and research universities, plays a key role in policy formation. As China's government faces new challenges in Africa, it draws heavily on the expertise of unofficial actors
  - Chinese CSOs want to engage with African CSOs but are unsure how to do so. While Saferworld has facilitated some connections, there should be more avenues of communication for African experts and Chinese leaders, so Chinese policy can reflect a range of voices beyond traditional Beijing parties. This type of direct engagement can produce tangible results:
    - Ahead of the most recent FOCAC meeting, African partners ensured that the action plan included specific commitments about tackling illicit guns in Africa
    - The UN Arms Trade Treaty negotiations illustrate successful engagement by African civil society and governments. The Chinese were skeptical about human rights language in the treaty, but discussions with African stakeholders depoliticized the issues and led China to compromise

China's influence in Africa often sparks fears that it seeks to export its form of government, but that is not China's intent. Though China takes a top-down, undemocratic approach to internal stability, officials don't see that as a model for Africa. Many Chinese officials appreciate the stability arising from African democracies and discourage interference in pursuit of Chinese interests.

### Thomas Wheeler, Conflict and Security Advisor, Saferworld

Thomas focused on lessons learned from Saferworld's work in Sudan.

Saferworld has facilitated engagement with China in Sudan and South Sudan, which have been important learning environments for Chinese political and commercial actors. Saferworld's work with China and South Sudan has two main objectives: 1) Increasing awareness and political buy-in for conflict sensitivity; 2) Facilitating increased engagement with civil society.

Saferworld has pursued these objectives through several avenues:

- Bi-lateral advocacy meetings and roundtables in Juba with embassy officials, Chinese companies and South Sudanese stakeholders to discuss joint solutions to challenges
- Engaging official and independent actors in Beijing (including party representatives, officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce, state-owned banks, state-owned enterprises, and research institutes and think tanks) through meetings and roundtables with African civil society delegates and conflict experts. China has been willing to engage with South Sudanese civil society, seeking:
  - alternative sources of information
  - opportunities to build new relationships
  - opportunities for officials to communicate Chinese policies and views
- Joint field research with Chinese institutions to increase knowledge around conflict issues and allow for direct engagement with those affected by conflict
- Joint publications with Chinese, European, and South Sudanese leaders
- Media work to raise awareness of conflict sensitivity and, more importantly, demonstrate to China that South Sudanese civil society supports the idea

Moving forward, Saferworld hopes to work directly with companies to prove that civil society engagement and conflict sensitivity (a concept that already has a good amount of buy-in) can work to their benefit. South Sudan can serve as a case study that can be applied elsewhere in Africa.

### Question-and-Answer Period

Katherine asked the presenters to speak to 1-2 recommendations for funders in this area. The three panelists replied that a wide range of Chinese actors are increasingly willing to engage on a number of fronts if we frame these discussions in a constructive way:

- Peace and security: The Chinese are more receptive to conversations about stability, rather than human rights
- Long-term interests: Chinese companies and officials recognize that conflict and instability can harm their financial investments and reputations in Africa
  - The Arab Spring and Libyan uprising demonstrated that host states can't always protect Chinese interests. China had to evacuate 30,000 citizens from Libya and sustained major financial losses in both Libya and South Sudan

- China recognizes the inherent risks in being associated with past regimes in times of upheaval. Chinese actors have begun to reach out to non-traditional stakeholders to hedge against political change and build relationships on the ground

The panelists were asked about Chinese cooperation on information-sharing. Panelists replied that although transparency is a work in progress, Chinese stakeholders increasingly recognize that secrecy implies they have something to hide. China has made moves towards openness (for example, establishing public affairs offices and supplying details on arms exports).

A participant asked if any of the panelists have had success engaging with Chinese foundations. Panelists replied that Chinese foundations and NGOs are primarily focused domestically, but some larger groups are looking to start engaging internationally (the Chinese Foundation for Poverty Alleviation, for instance).

Panelists were asked if any of the civil society delegations have included women or a gender perspective, since peace and stability can mean very different things to women than they do to men, and how they recommend bringing women's voices to the table. They responded that Western funders and actors have sought to incorporate gender balance within African delegations to China. As Chinese stakeholders solicit local views, the onus rests on African organizations to present different voices and include women's concerns in the conversation. This presents an opportunity for funders to build grantees' capacity and encourage their engagement.

A participant asked about whether Chinese engagement has had a positive impact in some of the poorer countries in Africa, despite the media portrayal of this work. Panelists replied that Western media often highlights the negative impacts of Chinese investment, but there are positive stories as well. Domestic contexts, political systems and CSO engagement can shape perceptions on the ground. For example:

- Trade unions mobilized around textile production in South Africa, improving their economic relationship with China
- Ghana's parliament actively scrutinizes economic cooperation with China, maximizing benefits for African stakeholders

The panelists were asked about their interactions with Chinese stakeholders when using human rights language. The panelists replied that the issue of human rights within China comes up indirectly in the course of discussions with Chinese partners. The topic is sensitive but not taboo. Conversations reveal widespread misconceptions about international human rights organizations among the Chinese public, whose views differ sharply from those of Western actors.

A participant asked about the response SaferWorld has been getting in their work in Sudan and what the progress has been on that work. SaferWorld's trip with Sudanese and South Sudanese civil society was well-received in China. It allowed Sudanese CSOs to understand the policy context and build relationships within China. Chinese stakeholders are interested in hearing from local voices, so Western actors may need to step back and let African partners take the lead. China is still reluctant to engage on internal political issues in Sudan, but as instability continues, it will be more open to civil society engagement.

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**To listen to the full telebriefing:**

Visit [IHRFG's website](#) (you will need to enter the password "humanrights").

**Resources:**

- [China's economic cooperation with South Sudan needs to be conflict-sensitive](#) by Thomas Wheeler, Saferworld
- [Remarks by Michael Kleinman](#), Humanity United