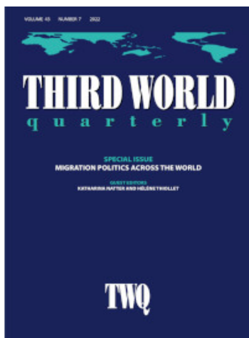

Third World Quarterly

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ctwq20

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To cite this article: Xinyu Yuan (2022) The Chinese approach to peacebuilding: contesting liberal peace?, Third World Quarterly, 43:7, 1798-1816, DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2022.2074389

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2074389

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THIRD WORLD QUARTERLY
2022, VOL. 43, NO. 7, 1798–1816
https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2074389

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The Chinese approach to peacebuilding: contesting liberal peace?

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ABSTRACT
The rise of China in peacebuilding has invoked lively debate about its role vis-à-vis the dominant peacebuilding order, or liberal peace. Extant research revolves around the binary construct of challenger-versus-supporter, ignoring the nature and scope of challenges that China poses to liberal peace. Also, these studies tend to unidimensionally examine China's stance on particular elements of liberal peace. There is scant research assessing China's role against the overall normative structure of the liberal peace paradigm. This article proposes a typology of contestation that targets different constitutive parts of liberal peace. China's stances on these constitutive parts are scrutinised based on a systematic review of its policy documents and interviews with scholars and practitioners in Beijing, Shanghai, Geneva and New York. This article finds that China has generally abstained from contesting the normative basis of liberal peace (validity contestation). However, it has been actively pursuing content contestation by reshaping the sequencing of existing elements of liberal peace and by incorporating the democratisation of the international system into the peacebuilding agenda. Moreover, China clearly opposes externally formulated or imposed peace solutions, whereby it advances application contestation against liberal peace.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 13 May 2021
Accepted 29 April 2022

KEYWORDS
China
peacebuilding
normative structure
contestation
liberal peace

Introduction

China has become increasingly active in peacebuilding, defined here as a range of activities by external actors in conflict-affected settings to 'prevent the resumption or escalation of violent conflict and establish a durable and self-sustaining peace' (Newman, Paris, and Richmond 2009, 3). China's growing role is evident in the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKOs). In November 1989, China sent 20 staff officers to the United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) in Namibia, marking its first presence in a UNPKO. By 2020, China had become the tenth-largest provider of UN peacekeeping forces globally (The Information Office of China's State Council 2020). It had contributed 2249 peacekeepers to 25 UNPKOs, far outnumbering the combined troop contribution of other permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).[1] Its financial contribution has also increased tremendously since the first peacekeeping-related payment in 1982. In 2020–2021,

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China contributed 15.21% of the overall UN peacekeeping budget, making it the second-largest donor following the United States (US). China now is the only actor worldwide making significant personnel and financial contributions to the UNPKOs at the same time.

Beyond peacekeeping, China has also expanded its participation in conflict mediation and post-conflict reconstruction, especially under President Xi Jinping's 'major-power diplomacy in the new era' (Zheng 2018, 6). The concept of peacebuilding has not yet entered China's policy discourse. Nor does China have an agency or policy dedicated to conflict-affected countries. Nevertheless, the dramatic expansion of China's economic footprints in sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, Central and Western Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America have made Beijing a stakeholder in these regions' conflicts and fragility. Through the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation commenced in 2000, the Belt and Road Initiative launched in 2013, and the South–South Cooperation Fund established in 2015, China has become the largest provider of commercial investment and development loans for many developing countries (Marc and Jones 2021). These are not limited to but certainly include many war-torn countries. Moreover, the establishment of the China–United Nations Peace and Development Trust Fund (UNPDF) in 2016 provided a new channel for China to mainstream its approach of peace through development, an approach dubbed developmental peace in the emerging literature (Wang and Liu 2013; He 2014, 2017; Meng 2017; Wang 2018; Yao 2018; Xue 2018; Yuan 2020).

The rise of China as a peacebuilding actor has inspired lively debates about its role-vis-à-vis the dominant peacebuilding order, or liberal peace. It is worth mentioning that the concept of liberal peace is not short of disputes and criticism in itself (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013). An international agreement is lacking on what it entails and what cases manifest (successful) liberal peacebuilding.[2] Therefore, the coherence of liberal peace should be taken with caution. However, the paradigm embodies a rough consensus that peace is best achieved and maintained (domestically and internationally) by liberal democracy combined with a market economy.[3]

There are two dominant views on China's role vis-à-vis liberal peace. On the one hand, some research suggests China is a systemic challenger that undermines the processes and outcomes of liberal peacebuilding. In conflict resolution, Abdenur (2016, 109) argues that China, Russia and India have backed each other to frame the Syrian civil war as 'an issue of terrorism', challenging the human rights-focused framing by the West. Höglund and Orjuela (2012) depict China as an 'illiberal peacebuilding power' in Sri Lanka. They contend that China has been protecting the regime of Sri Lanka against international criticism and reprisals, thereby showing 'little concern for human rights' (Höglund and Orjuela 2012, 95). Kneuer and Demmelhuber (2016, 775) argue that China, together with Russia, is assertively disseminating authoritarian 'norms, structures, processes, [and] policy approaches' globally. According to Cooley (2015), this authoritarian diffusion is gaining momentum in broader international politics. As a result, the universalism of liberal democracy and traditional tools of democracy promotion (such as conditionality) are challenged by the rise of these 'illiberal actors' (Cooley 2015, 50).

On the other hand, a body of research contends that China lacks revisionist intention and has primarily been a status quo actor in peace and development (see, for instance, Alden and Large 2015). Givens (2011) argues that China remains 'indifferent' to democracy, human rights and other liberal norms, meaning it does not aim to either undermine or consolidate these norms. Likewise, Dreher and Fuchs (2015) find that China's aid and investment do not

favour any particular regime type. Johnston (2003) concurs that China's extensive economic presence in Angola and Ethiopia does not hinder the democracy promotion efforts by the West in these countries. In broader research on rising powers, Newman and Zala (2018) argue that China mostly aspires to challenge the distribution of power in the existing international system, rather than the norms and rules underpinning the system. In my interviews with Chinese scholars and practitioners, they consensually emphasised the compatibility and complementarity between the Chinese and liberal approaches. An interviewee from the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), a think tank of China's Ministry of State Security, held that China and the West possess distinct advantages in peacebuilding and are complementing – rather than competing with – each other: 'China is good at building infrastructures with high quality and efficiency, while the West is good at promoting norms'.[4] A former peacekeeper of China also argued, 'There is no contradiction between the two approaches. On the contrary, the Chinese approach can reinvigorate the dwindling liberal peace'.[5]

The role of China in peacebuilding is insufficiently understood in the existing writings. First, the binary construct of challenger-versus-supporter fails to capture the dynamism and complexity of China's role in peacebuilding. A few studies have recognised that liberal peace is a complex field, and China, like many other countries, can pursue a dual role. Benabdallah (2019) compares China's activities in two sub-fields of peacebuilding (peacekeeping and development finance), suggesting that Beijing is a status quo actor in peacekeeping while challenging the prevailing norms of development finance. Richmond and Tellidis (2014, 575) hold that this duality (a simultaneous 'status quo and critical actor') is a common strategy pursued by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) countries, including China (see also Cooley et al. 2019). These recent studies reveal the possibility of acting both within and outside liberal peace, transcending a dichotomous conceptualisation in the existing literature.

Yet two deficiencies persist in the above scholarship. First, the notion of 'challenge' is poorly operationalised. To a great extent, 'challenge' becomes a shorthand for any deviation from the liberal peace prescriptions. However, such deviations may represent (1) a misunderstanding of liberal norms due to the different cultural baggage that China carries (Wiener 2020); (2) a variant of liberal peace; (3) acceptable alternatives with added value; or (4) revisionist attempts. The many shades of deviations are obscured. Indeed, the so-called liberal core sometimes also acts against liberal peace (Höglund and Orjuela 2012). If deviation suffices to categorise an actor as a challenger, it would ironically place China and conventional liberal actors in the same group. Therefore, more nuanced analyses are needed to reveal the nature and scope of the 'challenge' that China pursues. The second deficiency of extant studies rests on their analytical approach. They tend to unidimensionally look at China's peacebuilding activities, such as peacekeeping, human rights promotion and conflict mediation. Some research covers various sub-fields of peacebuilding, yet the interrelationship between the sub-fields is seldom considered, as if they were conceptually and empirically independent from each other. As Jütersonke et al. (2021) rightly points out, peacebuilding entails different elements that relate to each other in complicated ways; they assert varying normative obligations and require different actions. The role of China, therefore, needs to be assessed against the *overall normative structure* of liberal peace instead of a distinct sub-field of it.

To address these shortcomings, the article turns to norm contestation theories. It distinguishes three types of contestation in the field of peacebuilding, discerning the nature and

scope of 'challenges' by China. It makes twofold contributions, one theoretical and the other empirical. Theoretically, the article reveals a spectrum of contestation, transcending a dichotomised account of China between challenger and supporter. It dissects the normative structure of liberal peace and provides a nuanced assessment of China based on what constitutive parts China contests and how. Empirically, this article provides a fresh analysis of first-hand data, including primary documents produced by the Chinese government (white papers, statements, leaders' speeches) and 30 interviews conducted in 2019–2020. These interviewees consist of three groups: (1) 21 Chinese scholars (including overseas Chinese) specialising in conflict management, development assistance or regional diplomacy (such as China's policy towards Africa, Asia and the Middle East); (2) four current or former officials of China involved in peacekeeping, conflict management or development aid; and (3) five Western diplomats serving at country missions and relevant UN agencies such as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

The article proceeds as follows. After the introduction, the second section reviews norm contestation theories, elaborating how they can help enrich our understanding of China's role beyond a binary construct. The third section presents the analytical framework of the article, distinguishing three types of norm contestation (validity, content and application) that target different constitutive parts of a normative structure. This section also applies the analytical framework to peacebuilding, outlining possible scenarios of contestation in the field. The fourth section analyses China's behaviours in peacebuilding since the 2000s. The analysis includes China's discourse and practices in the field, such as diplomatic behaviours, domestic arrangements and relevant programmes. As existing studies suggest, contestation can be discursive and non-discursive. Analysing China's practices can thus capture broader contestation beyond discursive forms.[6]

The empirical analysis of the article is revealing. China has generally abstained from validity contestation and demonstrated its openness to the liberal conceptualisation of sovereignty and peace. However, the content of peacebuilding has been a mainstay of China's contestation. It challenges the existing sequencing of peacebuilding while highlighting a new element beyond liberal peace: democratising the international system. Moreover, China's application contestation is pronounced as it refutes externally imposed solutions. The concluding section summarises the main arguments of this article and points out avenues for future research.

Existing theories on norm contestation

The nuances of contestation have been a central topic of norm studies in international relations. Norms constitute 'standards of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity' (Katzenstein 1996, 5). They (re)shape identities and behavioural patterns through regulatory, constitutive, prescriptive and evaluative effects (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Winston 2018). While being a source of behavioural changes, norms in themselves are often dynamic and ambiguous, subject to continuous and multi-dimensional contestation.

Contestation refers to discursive or non-discursive disapproval of a norm by relevant actors (Wiener 2004; Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2018). The inclusion of new actors often triggers contestation due to their divergent interpretations of the norm (Wiener 2004). However, contestation does not always erode the robustness of a norm. Instead, it sometimes helps clarify the meaning and enhances inter-subjective acceptance of a norm (Wolff and

Zimmermann 2016). Contestation takes various forms and impacts the robustness of a given norm differently.

Contestation may target individual norms, including the procedures and substances of a norm. According to Welsh (2013, 5), procedural contestation deals with 'the appropriate institutional forum for making decisions about a specific norm'. Substantive contestation addresses a norm's content, or 'the outcomes' of decisions, in the words of Ralph and Gallagher (2015, 3). Deitelhoff and Zimmermann (2018, 60) distinguish 'validity contestation' from 'applicatory contestation' based on whether the 'normcore' is attacked. These studies often suggest that validity contestation represents a more severe challenge than content and procedural contestation, as the former attacks the very legitimacy of a norm.

Instead of focusing on individual norms, some research investigates which type of norm (in a collection of multiple norms) is contested. This line of research starts by arguing that norms differ in their strength, normative claims and moral reach; hence, contestation generates varying impacts when targeting different types of norms (Winston 2018; Lantis and Wunderlich 2018). Winston (2018) proposes the concept of a norm cluster, suggesting that norms in an issue domain form a tripartite structure addressing the problem, value, and behaviour in the domain, respectively. She contends that 'a problem inhibits the full enjoyment of a value and necessitates a corrective behavior' (Winston 2018, 640), assuming the three types of norms in an issue domain to be logically connected.

The concept of normative structure, however, does not assume a coherent interrelationship between various norms. Van Kersbergen and Verbeek (2007) deconstruct the EU normative structure into four components: *principles* (such as sovereignty), *norms* (such as subsidiarity), *rules* (such as the rules of legislation) and *procedural standards* of decision-making. They do not presume the four types of norms are inherently aligned. Likewise, Wiener (2020) portrays three types of norms underlying global governance: fundamental norms, organising principles, and standards. Specifically, fundamental norms require something to be 'realized to the greatest extent possible' (Wiener 2020, 16). Organising principles concern the implementation, procedures and institutions of fundamental norms. Standards provide details for definitive actions. In theory, fundamental norms do not necessarily inform organising principles or standards. Depending on what types of norms are contested, Wiener distinguishes *norm* change from *normative* transformation induced by contestation (ibid).

These theories suggest that contestation can target different dimensions of a norm or different parts of a norm cluster (or structure). They have illuminated the varying essence of contestation and different implications that follow. These insights are highly relevant to peacebuilding, a field of complex norms varying in the strength, functions and moral obligations they assert. Unfortunately, these insights have received scant attention when it comes to research on China's peace engagement. To capture the complexity and nuances of contestation in peacebuilding, the following section develops a typology of contestation that will be used to examine China's discourse and practices in the field.

A typology of norm contestation in the field of peacebuilding

Building on the existing literature on norm contestation, this article posits that an international issue domain (such as peacebuilding) entails a tripartite normative structure. First, it has a normative basis, which identifies a problem and frames why the problem needs to be governed internationally. Second, content norms in the domain address what actions need

to be taken to address the problem. Third, implementation principles guide how actions are operationalised in practice.[7] Correspondingly, there are three types of norm contestation: validity contestation targets the normative basis, content contestation attacks the content norms, and application contestation disputes the implementation principles.

This article spotlights the three types of norms for two reasons. First, the three types of norms are essentially distinguishable, although they may also connect to each other in complex ways. Furthermore, they are representative of the functions norms can play. The normative basis creates new social categories (such as conflict-affected or fragile states) and justifies actions, representing a norm's constitutive function. Content norms define the attainment or avoidance of something as 'good' in addressing a situation, illustrating the prescriptive and evaluative functions (Winston 2018). Implementation principles enable specific courses of action while restraining others, representing the regulatory function of norms. Altogether, the three types of norms provide a cognitive and assessment framework of problem-solving in an issue domain.

Peacebuilding is no exception to the tripartite normative structure. The normative basis of peacebuilding addresses why international intervention is legitimate and desired in a specific situation. The content norms elucidate what intervention needs to be made to build peace. The implementation principles concern the operationalisation of such intervention. Under the dominance of liberal peace, the normative structure of the existing peacebuilding order has displayed an apparent liberal orientation in the three constitutive parts, although there is no lack of tension and contradiction within liberal peace (see Richmond 2006).

The normative basis of liberal peace and validity contestation

The normative basis of liberal peace revolves around a reconceptualisation of sovereignty and security. In particular, the norm of sovereignty as responsibility (SAR)[8] reinterprets sovereignty as not merely absolute control over territory and peoples but also the 'obligations to protect core human rights' (Foot 2011, 50). Therefore, sovereignty is no longer viewed as an absolute state right free from external scrutiny and intervention in any circumstances. Instead, it becomes (at least partially) conditional on responsible domestic governance. Meanwhile, the notion of responsibility of the international community (RIC) frames massive human rights violations as an international security concern since 'the need for human security and justice' goes beyond the state system (Richmond 2006, 299; Deng 2010).

The notions of SAR and RIC form the normative basis of liberal peace in multiple ways. Firstly, they reconceptualise security threats in liberal terms, including wars, structural violence (as in ethnic cleansing) and large-scale human suffering (see Diehl 2016; Uesugi and Richmond 2021). Therefore, they problematise broader situations in need of intervention. Secondly, these two notions suggest a deepened and broadened purpose of peacebuilding. External interventions are expected to not only terminate or mitigate the 'symptoms' of conflicts but also help build 'responsible' and capable sovereignty (the 'causes' of conflicts). Moreover, 'peace' is defined and measured in liberal terms. Thus, peacebuilding efforts often involve reordering the distribution of 'power, prestige, rules, and rights' in conflict-affected countries modelled on stable liberal societies (Richmond 2006, 299), which somewhat inform the content and implementation principles of liberal pace (to be detailed below). Validity contestation against this normative basis may reject (1) the liberal conceptualisation of

sovereignty and peace or (2) the automaticity of external intervention when this 'peace' is threatened.

The content norms of liberal peace and content contestation

While the normative basis of liberal peace opens the door for external actors to help tame the (externally identified) source of (again, externally defined) threats to peace in domestic realms, the defining characteristics of this paradigm rest on its content – or the substances of intervention. Liberal peace asserts that peace is best maintained domestically (and internationally) through a combination of liberal democracy and market economy.[9] In programmatic terms, this often translates into a reformist agenda to institutionalise neo-liberal elements in a wholesale manner (Richmond 2006; Call and Cook 2003). As existing research reveals, 'maximalist' and 'moderate' operations have dominated the UN peace missions since the end of the Cold War, with a focus on establishing 'decent governance' in conflict-affected societies (Hellmüller 2021, 6). In particular, maximalist mandates feature prominently in the post-2000 period, designed to instal a neo-liberal package in conflict-affected settings composed of human rights promotion, civil society-building, economic reforms, the rule of law, judicial reforms, security sector reform, transitional justice and the like (ibid). Peacebuilding efforts are often depicted as compromised, if not illiberal, when excluding these neo-liberal elements (see, for instance, Höglund and Orjuela 2012).

In recent years, the feasibility and effects of democratic institution-building in immediate post-conflict environments have been the subject of sharp debate (Brancati and Snyder 2013). Critiques suggest that rapid democratisation may 'fan the flames of internal tensions', as in the case of Kenya in 2007 (Alden and Large 2015, 23). Nevertheless, such criticism rarely questions the primacy of democratic institution-building *per se* in the peacebuilding agenda. More often, it calls for policy efforts to create favourable conditions for democratisation programmes (Brancati and Snyder 2013). Still, liberal democracy is conceived as a synonym for 'effective, inclusive and accountable' governance that is 'more likely to withstand crises and peacefully manage disputes' (The UN Secretary-General 2015, 3). In contrast, the economic development of conflict-affected countries only has secondary importance in liberal peace (Richmond 2006). Content contestation may arise to question a particular element of liberal peace. For instance, a country may oppose including transitional justice in peace operations. Alternatively, content contestation can question the prevailing sequencing of peacebuilding elements – for instance, the primacy of democratic institution-building.

The principles of implementation and application contestation

The implementation of liberal peace often involves intrusive and even coercive policy tools (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013). According to Paris (2002), external actors routinely use four mechanisms to instal liberal peace. First, they often shape the language and elements of peace agreements, as in El Salvador, Namibia, Mozambique, Rwanda and Bosnia, among other places. Second, peacebuilders instruct post-conflict states to implement these settlements by training their governments, media and civil society groups. The third mechanism rests on financial conditionality, where the provision of aid is contingent on reforms towards decentralisation, privatisation, removal of wage and price controls, free trade policies and

the like. Moreover, peacebuilders may perform 'quasi-governmental functions' in conflict-affected settings where they assume positions in key government departments such as defence, foreign affairs, finance and public security (Paris 2002). In extreme cases, liberal peacebuilding actors also use force to impose a peace resolution or a post-conflict order, as in the case of Libya, blurring the lines between peace operations and regime change.

The 'local turn' of liberal peace in part seeks to correct external actors' 'intrusiveness and dominance' (Von Billerbeck 2015, 296; Paffenholz 2015). It acknowledges the local – an ambivalent concept – as an agent of peacebuilding (Leonardsson and Rudd 2015). However, on closer examination, the local turn still places the (liberal) international community in the driver's seat to determine which local actors, ideas and initiatives are 'legitimate' and viable (Von Billerbeck 2015). In the words of Mac Ginty (2008), it is more about a (selective) co-option of indigenous peace proposals into the liberal peace agenda. Application contestation may oppose the intrusive ways of implementing externally formulated peace solutions regardless of the goals and content of these solutions.

In brief, liberal peace is underpinned by a normative structure addressing the normative basis, content and implementation principles of peacebuilding. Different types of contestation can arise to challenge particular parts of this normative structure, as summarised in Table 1.

Examining the Chinese approach to peacebuilding

This section examines China's discourses and practices against the normative structure of liberal peace since the 2000s. It investigates what types of contestation China has engaged in and through what strategies. As shown in the analysis below, China does not evenly pursue all types of contestation. More precisely, its contestation focuses on the implementation principles and, to a lesser extent, the content of liberal peace.[10]

Growing acceptance of the liberal basis

China has generally embraced the normative basis of liberal peace since the 2000s, despite a considerable caution against the dilution of state sovereignty. The *Position Paper of China on UN Reforms in 2005* explicitly states 'when there is a large-scale humanitarian crisis, it is the legitimate concern of the international community to ease and stop the crisis' (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China 2005). Correspondingly, China has generously contributed to UNPKOs since the 2000s, including multi-dimensional and robust operations that authorise the use of force for self-defence and the defence of mandates (Zürcher 2020). It established two training centres, one in Hebei and the other in Beijing, to hone the peacekeeping skills of the Chinese police and military. It also set up two standby peacekeeping contingents, enabling the rapid deployment of 330 Chinese police and 8000 militants to UNPKOs (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China 2020).

More importantly, China has linked its peace engagement to the grand strategy of building great responsible power (Hirono and Lanteigne 2011), as illustrated in the *White Paper on China's Peaceful Development (2011)* and the *White Paper on Chinese Thirty Years' Participation in the UN Peacekeeping Operations (2020)* (The Information Office of China's

Table 1. The typology of contestation in the field of peacebuilding.

Normative structure	Types of contestation	Illustrations in peacebuilding
Normative basis	Validity contestation	Contesting the liberal conceptualisation of sovereignty (conditional sovereignty) and security threats (war and massive human rights violations)
Content	Content contestation	Contesting the neo-liberal elements of peacebuilding or the primacy of democratic institution-building
Implementation principles	Application contestation	Contesting intrusive and externally driven mechanisms

State Council 2011, 2020). The current peacebuilding architecture is increasingly viewed as congruent with China's own normative perceptions and policy interests.

Since the 2000s, China has even tactically reinterpreted the principle of non-interference that had formed the cornerstone of its diplomacy since the 1970s. As a Chinese scholar I interviewed recognised, Beijing now 'says it is constructively participating rather than interfering in other countries' domestic affairs'.[11] Illustratively, China promoted the unanimous passing of Resolution 1769 in 2007 during its rotating UNSC presidency that authorised the African Union–United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID).[12] China proactively persuaded Khartoum to grant consent while insisting on the consent of the Sudanese government in all proposed resolutions (Permanent Mission of China to the UN. 2006; see also Holslag 2008). Earlier on, China also voted in favour of Resolution 1264 in 1999, which authorised the creation of an International Force for East Timor (INTERFET) led by Australia, even though Indonesia's 'consent' was 'no doubt influenced by implacable Western pressure' (Lanteigne 2011, 320). In both cases, China opted to ignore whether the consent was voluntarily granted or not. The purposeful omission allowed China to support and even actively participate in these peace missions despite a general stance on non-interference. As such, China has strategically aligned itself with the normative basis of liberal peace, admitting the legitimacy and necessity of external intervention in conflict situations.

This is not to say China has entirely shifted to a liberal conceptualisation of sovereignty and security. Sovereign equality and non-interference still dominate China's official discourse and relevant programmes. A researcher from the Foreign Affairs University of China – an affiliation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) – stated in our interview that 'It is hard to imagine China abandoning the principle of non-interference, although this principle has complicated China's quest for a greater role in international politics'.[13] Also indicative of its classic non-interference principle, China has been hesitant to scale up its investment in conflict prevention. A senior staff of OCHA remarked that 'For China, prevention is fine in conceptual terms, but not in practice'.[14] Moreover, interviews with UN and Western diplomats reveal that China and Russia opposed the language of 'human rights' when negotiating the sustaining peace agenda. Zhang Jun, Permanent Representative of China to the UN,[15] refuted a default link between human rights violations and external intervention in an official statement in 2020, contending that 'Whether human rights protection should be included in the UN peace mandates depends on the situation of each mission […]' (Permanent Mission of China to the UN 2020). In this vein, Beijing still questions the liberal vision of peace and sovereignty in particular issues and places. Syria is a case in point: between 2011and 2020, China vetoed 10 draft resolutions on Syria at UNSC,[16] criticising that these proposals put pressure on only one party of the conflict and did not respect the integrity and sovereignty of Syria (Permanent Mission of China to the UN 2021a).

Also, China is not always in line with the West in identifying a situation in need of external intervention.[17] In cases of high stakes to its national interests (such as Myanmar and North Korea), China tends to swing back to its traditional stance on non-interference and denounce external (especially West-led) intervention (Fung 2019). Concerned about its international image and status, China's stance is also subject to the social influence of its peer groups, including France, the UK and the US (known as the P3) and representatives of the Global South (often geographically specific regional organisations) (Foot 2020; Fung 2016, 2019). According to Fung (2019), China tends to insist on a classic interpretation of sovereignty when its peer groups divide on their policy positions regarding a conflict and on the willingness to exact social costs on China for not aligning with them.

In general, China adheres to a more restrictive reading of (1) scenarios where intervention is expected; and (2) the purposes of such intervention, which are much less ambitious than some liberal actors envisaged (Foot 2011). However, this cautiousness mainly reflects its concern over the expansive definition of 'conflict situations' and arbitrary operationalisation of peace missions.[18] Manifestly, in its statements at the UN, China consistently stresses that 'no arbitrary interpretation of the mandate of the Security Council should be made, let alone pursuing regime change under the pretext of protecting civilians' (Permanent Mission of China to the UN 2013). Validity contestation has not featured prominently in China's discourse and practices since the 2000s. China's validity contestation is now very limited compared to (1) its traditional normative stance before the 2000s, in which peace operations stood for imperialist invasion (Yuan 2020); and (2) its contestation against the content and implementation of liberal peace, as detailed below.

An alternative agenda of peacebuilding and content contestation

While open to the normative basis of liberal peace, China does not shy from content contestation. It has attempted to incorporate a new element into the peacebuilding agenda, namely the democratisation of the international system. Meanwhile, China has rearticulated the sequencing of existing peacebuilding elements, prioritising economic development over democratic institution-building.

Firstly, China has sought to incorporate the democratisation of the international system into peacebuilding. It holds that international-level reforms are essential for domestic peace since the hegemonic and exclusive nature of the current international system often fuels conflicts and restrains the development of fragile states (He 2017). President Xi Jinping contended in a speech, 'All countries have the right to participate in international and regional security affairs on an equal footing and shoulder the shared responsibility to maintain security both internationally and in various regions' (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China 2014). The call for democratising the international system bears both material and normative implications. It means broadening the representation and participation of developing countries (including China itself) in extant international institutions. Concurrently, it also emphasises cultural diversity rather than the universality of liberal democracy (Permanent Mission of China to the UN 2004; see also Foot 2020). Therefore, the democratisation of the international system would consequently dilute the power and influence of the US/West,[19] which serves China's grand strategy of peaceful rise.

Secondly, China has pursued an alternative sequencing of existing peacebuilding elements, prioritising economic development, political stability and immediate societal needs over democratic institution-building (Kuo 2015; He 2017; Kerr and Xu 2014; Wang 2018). Justifications for this alternative sequencing are primarily functional. The Chinese discourse contends that the rights to subsistence and development prevail over civil and political rights (The Information Office of China's State Council 2013). The Chinese Ambassador to the UN maintained that

> priority [of UN peace operations] should be given to key sectors such as infrastructure, agriculture, resources utilization, accessibility of education, among others, as these are all important conditions for the long-term peace and stability of a country. What transpired recently in Afghanistan proves that 'democratic transformation' imposed from the outside will inevitably fail. (Permanent Mission of China to the UN 2021a)

Besides, China holds that democratic institution-building requires particular socio-economic conditions. Li (2019, 32), a researcher at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, argues that rapid democratisation in immature post-conflict environments is 'futile and even runs counter to the very promise of liberal peace', a view expressed in many official statements of China. While not refuting democratic institution-building directly, China remains vague on the right conditions for these political programmes.

In practice, China's bilateral programmes in conflict-affected settings are mainly economic. Its investment and development loans are ever-expanding in the industrial, agricultural, energy and transportation sectors in these countries.[20] It also financed and built wells, hospitals, schools and vocational training centres in conflict-torn societies. According to a Chinese scholar I interviewed, China's infrastructure projects offer a practical approach to reconciliation: 'When roads are built, geographically separated communities can better connect to and understand each other'.[21] According to another interviewee, effective infrastructure-building and public service provision require a competent and often centralised political authority.[22] Therefore, China's peacebuilding programmes focus on strengthening the capacity of the post-conflict governments, including training for governmental officials, financial support to national anti-terrorism forces, and joint peacekeeping exercises.[23] When it comes to civil society-building, media training, electoral assistance, legislative reforms and other efforts to instal democracy, China nonetheless has remained absent. According to an interviewee, China also seeks to cut peacekeeping budgets for human rights and gender positions 'because the Chinese delegates to the UN mostly come from the Ministry of Commerce who do not see the value' of these non-economic efforts.[24]

Peacebuilding as a locally led process

China's application contestation against liberal peace has been pronounced. It emphasises national ownership, rejecting externally formulated or imposed peacebuilding solutions. And as an interviewee pointed out, 'by "local actors", China means those related to the state; not "actors" of the civil society'.[25] What China proposes is not a room for adjusting externally formulated templates as suggested by the local turn discourse mentioned above. Instead, it insists that local actors (or domestic governments, to be more specific) make ultimate decisions about the peacebuilding agenda. An interviewee recalled that Chinese diplomats always insisted on 'working on an equal footing with less arrogance, more friendly

consultations and fewer attempts to force recipes on the conflict-affected countries'.[26] From the Chinese perspective, external actors should limit themselves to *auxiliary* and *necessary* roles in peacebuilding processes. Dai Bin, Deputy Permanent Representative of China to the UN, held that 'National reconstruction […] is primarily the responsibility of the countries concerned […]. The UN and the international community should support these countries to improve their capacity for self-driven development' (Permanent Mission of China to the UN 2021b).

To some extent, China's discourse on peacebuilding implies paternalism since it depicts China as possessing superior knowledge of how fragile states ought to develop (economically) (Suzuki 2011). Pan Yaling, a researcher at Fudan University, wrote that 'In the 1970s, China's development lagged behind that of some African countries. However, after more than 30 years of "development first" policy, China's development has been far ahead of African countries that followed the Western recipe of "security first"' (2016, 47). That being said, Chinese officials and scholars tend to view the Chinese model as *non-exportable*, or at least not without meaningful adjustments tailored to specific contexts. This is because the Chinese model 'grows out of the country's specific national circumstances […] after a protracted process of exploring, experimentation, and modification', President Xi Jinping asserts (China Daily 2017). Even in Africa, where China's presence is ever-expanding, Chinese scholars often ardently 'oppose finding a way out for peace in the region through coercive means, externally imposed solutions and prescriptive models' (Wang and Liu 2013, 47).

In programmatic terms, China abstains from 'educating or reforming natives; but show[s] them an example of success', Suzuki (2011, 271) notes. Demonstration, non-conditional aid and small-scale skills transfer speak to this point. Examples include the agricultural demonstration centre in Baguineda of southern Mali, an industrial park in Ethiopia, and other economic collaborations under the Forum of China–Africa Cooperation.[27] China insists on non-conditional aid, attaching no prerequisites to the recipient countries' governance or human rights performance (Givens 2011). This non-conditionality helps China claim its moral superiority over the 'more socially interventionist aid schemes of the West' (Suzuki 2009, 787). Non-conditional aid also allows China to frame an equal partnership with the aid-receiving countries instead of a hierarchical donor–recipient relationship. As such, the Chinese government demonstrates its solidarity with and harnesses support from the vast developing countries,[28] including the conflict-affected ones.

In conflict management, China mainly engages in what Hirono dubs incentivizing mediation (Hirono 2019), that brings warring parties to the negotiation table without 'structuring the negotiations, creating temporal constraints, redefining issues and creating focal points and/or propos[ing] alternatives' (Beardsley et al. 2006, 62). This mediating style has been evident in the peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government since 2014. Beijing held frequent meetings with the two warring parties between 2014 and 2016. In these mediating efforts, China's role has remained facilitative, merely acting as a neutral channel of communication between the two conflicting parties (Hirono 2019). This contrasts with the US approach in the Gulf, which often makes itself a negotiator (Leonardsson and Rudd 2015). China maintains consistency in its discourse and practices regarding 'Afghan solutions to Afghan problems' (Permanent Mission of China to the UN 2018). An interviewee from OCHA confirms this point, remarking that 'China is consistent in finding diplomatic solutions by identifying consensus points. It differs from Russia who throws their weight around in negative terms'.[29] An interviewee familiar with China's conflict management policy

in Southeast Asia also held that Beijing does not bother to set timetables or roadmaps for negotiations. 'As long as stakeholders come to the negotiation table, there is always an opportunity to communicate and find a mutually agreed solution', the interviewee explained.[30]

Conclusion

This article advances an analytical framework on norm contestation and applies it to examine China's engagement with the normative structure of liberal peace. It argues that norm contestation in peacebuilding may take three forms. Validity contestation questions the normative basis of liberal peace. Content contestation concerns the components of liberal peace or the sequencing of these components. Application contestation addresses the principles of implementation without touching its fundamental legitimacy or content.

Through examining China's discourses and practices about peace and conflict since the 2000s, this article shows that China has generally abstained from validity contestation and moved to accommodate the liberal conceptualisation of sovereignty and security. To some extent, China has tactically reinterpreted its long-held principle of non-interference to stand comfortably with these liberal notions. However, China has been assertively pursuing content contestation. On the one hand, it seeks to integrate international system reforms into the peacebuilding agenda. On the other hand, it attempts to replace the primacy of democratic institution-building with economic development in peacebuilding programmes. Moreover, application contestation by China has been pronounced, where Beijing explicitly opposes externally formulated or imposed solutions. Instead, China emphasises locally led processes and solutions of peacebuilding, where 'local' primarily refers to the domestic governments. In practice, it resorts to demonstration, small-scale knowledge transfer and non-conditional aid as implementation principles in peacebuilding.

The article constitutes an initial exercise in unpacking the complicated facets and implications of China's rise in the field of peacebuilding and beyond. It might be tempting to assert that China's contestation remains manageable and limited since it mainly targets the content and application of liberal peace, not the normative basis. However, this superficial conclusion cannot be drawn. The actual impact of each type of contestation depends on the intensity of contesting behaviours, reactions by other peacebuilding actors and the resilience of the targeted norms *per se*. Also, China may turn to validity contestation when the domestic and international environments change.[31] More theoretical and empirical work is needed to fully grasp how different types of contestation play out as well as the factors shaping China's contestation patterns.

Acknowledgements

I thank Keith Krause, Kazushige Kobayashi, Swapna Kona Nayudu, Agnieszka Paczynska and the anonymous reviewers of *Third World Quarterly* for their constructive comments on the earlier drafts. I also thank Augusta Nannerini, Rosalind Tan and Swetha Ramachandran for proofreading the article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This article is an output of the project 'Coherence or Contestation: Chinese, Japanese and Russian Approaches to the Transformation of Peacebuilding Practices', funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) under Grant 100017_176363/1.

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Notes

1. See UN Peacekeeping, *Summary of Contribution to UN Peacekeeping by Country*, accessed 31 January 2021, https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/03_country_an_mission_34_jan2021.pf
2. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.
3. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.
4. Interview with a researcher of CICIR specializing in China's policy on Africa, 28 June 2019, Beijing.
5. Interview with a former peacekeeper of China, 9 June 2019, Beijing.
6. This is not to say practices always align with the normative or discursive orientation. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.
7. This typology is built on analytical frameworks developed by Wiener (2004, 2014, 2020) and Winston (2018).
8. Some understand SAR as recasting 'traditional' sovereignty while others highlight that SAR has deep historical roots. See Glanville (2011).
9. I thank the reviewers for raising this point.
10. This does not mean China always pursues content and application contestation in every case and to the same extent. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.
11. Interview with a Chinese scholar specializing in China's foreign policy, 13 August 2019, Beijing.
12. China was still concerned with sovereignty in this case, preventing it from taking actions more timely and decisively. The peace operation in Darfur was introduced as a joint undertaking by the African Union and the international community after the Sudanese government granted consent. Also, fearing the negative consequences for the 2008 Olympic Games played an important role in China's activeness in the issue, as the existing research often emphasised. However, the Darfur case is illustrative of China's efforts in flexibly interpreting its non-interference principle to fit in the need of international intervention in particular scenarios. I thank an anonymous reviewer for helping refine my argument in this regard.
13. Interview with a Chinese scholar specializing in China's foreign policy, 13 August 2019. Beijing.
14. Interview with senior staff of the Policy Branch of OCHA, 12 June 2019, New York.
15. Throughout the article, 'China's ambassador to the UN' refers to the UN as a whole rather than a particular UN institution.
16. I thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point.
17. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.
18. Interview with a Chinese scholar specializing in China's peacekeeping policy, 23 July 2019, Shanghai.
19. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

20. See AidData, *China's Global Development Footprint*, accessed 3 March 2021, https://www.aiddata.org/china-official-finance
21. Interview with a Chinese scholar specializing in China's BRI policy, 17 July 2019, Shanghai.
22. Interview with a former Chinese peacekeeper, 9 June 2019, Beijing.
23. See the program lists of UNPDF, available at https://www.un.org/en/unpdf/index.shtml
24. Interview with senior staff of permanent Canadian mission to the UN, 10 June 2019.
25. Interview with senior staff of OCHA, 12 June 2019, New York.
26. Interview with a diplomat of Permanent Mission of the Czech Republic to the UN, 18 January 2019, Geneva.
27. Interview with a Chinese scholar specializing in China–Africa relations, 19 June 2019, Beijing.
28. Interview with an expert on China's South–South cooperation and aid policy, 15 July 2019, Shanghai.
29. Interview with senior staff of the Policy Branch of OCHA, 12 June 2019, New York.
30. Interview with a Chinese scholar specializing in China's foreign policy, 13 August 2019, Beijing.
31. I thank the reviewers for pushing forward these reflections.

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