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The Peacebuilders Playground: Peacebuilding Practices in Timor-Leste

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ABSTRACT


This paper explores whether the practices enacted by China and Japan in Timor-Leste indicate a challenge to the liberal peacebuilding paradigm with an alternative model. Examining Timor-Leste, which was hailed as a model of liberal peacebuilding in the early 2000s but is now facing significant challenges to the peacebuilding and state-building project, and is captured by the global challenges to the peacebuilding field, this paper argues that China's approach to peacebuilding is not yet sufficiently developed, although it does provide opportunities for individuals to challenge the Western paradigm. Meanwhile, Japan is too closely linked to other Western peacebuilders to be considered an alternative model in its own right. Drawing on data from over fifty interviews conducted in Timor-Leste between April and July 2023, this paper contributes to a nuanced understanding of peacebuilding practices.

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KEYWORDS Peacebuilding; China; Japan; Timor-Leste; practices

Introduction

The contemporary world is experiencing considerable challenges to the liberal peacebuilding paradigm that emerged in the late 1990s. These challenges are exemplified by numerous examples of armed conflicts from Africa to the more pertinent example of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing war and humanitarian crisis in Gaza. At the same time, the traditional peacebuilding model is facing challenges from heads of states such as Trump, who are increasingly decreasing the funding towards peace-oriented projects and programs and is reaching its limits in terms of its implementation. Speaking towards this trend, various countries that

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have previously supported this model are now reducing their financial contributions to peacebuilding initiatives.¹ The tectonic challenges currently being observed are prompting critical peace and conflict scholars to reassess the field's direction and to determine whether we are already witnessing modes or models that are advancing possible alternatives.²

The concept of peacebuilding has been defined through norms and their associated practices.³ In 1992, the former United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, defined peacebuilding as 'action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace to avoid a relapse into conflict'.⁴ The *Agenda for Peace* not only coined the term 'peacebuilding', but also provided a framework indicating that development is required to mitigate conflict and consolidate peace. This has been reinforced recently by the *New Agenda for Peace*.⁵ Since then, peacebuilding has evolved significantly.⁶ With the end of the Cold War, peacebuilding moved towards the maintenance of the liberal international order, which is characterized by its normative underpinnings of democracy, neoliberalism and human rights.⁷ This transition reached its apex in the establishment of states such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Timor-Leste. Peacebuilding underwent yet another transformation in the post-9/11 era, evolving into a state-building agenda, a development that was largely influenced by the practices of its primary supporters, seeking to support the construction of states in so-called fragile countries, mimicking the institutional framework in the Western hemisphere.⁸ However, the field of peacebuilding is currently facing an era of radical uncertainty, as evidenced by contemporary armed conflicts in Afghanistan, Myanmar, Sudan and Ukraine. These conflicts have led to a re-evaluation of the prevailing peacebuilding model, particularly in the context of its outright rejection, retreat or failure in these countries.

In this context, scholars have recently begun to challenge the validity of the liberal model of peacebuilding and have further opposed it with emergent forms of approaches by countries that are traditionally outside the liberal international order. Some scholars have begun to demonstrate that rising powers have increasingly engaged with CAF countries through various modes of engagement, often labelled as illiberal or authoritarian.⁹ Others have indicated that countries experiencing conflict and fragility have

¹OECD, "International Aid Falls in 2024 for First Time in Six Years," Says OECD.

²Jütersonke et al., "Norm Contestation and Normative Transformation in Global Peacebuilding Order(s)".

³Paris, *At War's End*.

⁴Boutros-Ghali, "An Agenda for Peace", 11.

⁵Boutros-Ghali, "An Agenda for Peace"; "A New Agenda for Peace".

⁶Newman, Paris, and Richmond, *New Perspectives on Liberal Peacebuilding*; Call, "The Evolution of Peacebuilding".

⁷Paris, "Saving Liberal Peacebuilding".

⁸Chandler, "Peacebuilding as Statebuilding".

⁹Peter and Rice, "Non-Western Approaches to Peacemaking and Peacebuilding: State-of-the-Art and an Agenda for Research"; Lewis, Heathershaw, and Megoran, "Illiberal Peace?"

diverged from the liberal peacebuilding paradigm, while concurrently eschewing reliance on international involvement.¹⁰ In such instances, particularly in Southeast Asia, as countries such as Myanmar and Indonesia are demonstrated to show, these nations have exhibited an increasing inclination towards the adoption of authoritarian and illiberal conflict management methodologies. In this context and coupled with peacebuilding's profound uncertainty, this paper poses the following research questions: What insights can be extracted from China and Japan's practices in Timor-Leste, and to what extent can these two countries be considered as offering alternative models to the liberal peacebuilding paradigm?

We argue that regardless of whether they are individuals from bilateral aid agencies of either China or Japan, their respective embassies or NGOs funded by Japan, or are engaging in Timor-Leste through the private sector, the practices of Chinese and Japanese actors in Timor-Leste do not provide evidence that either country offers an alternative model to the liberal peacebuilding paradigm. Instead, China's approach to peacebuilding is not yet mature enough, although it does offer opportunities for individuals to challenge the Western paradigm. Meanwhile, Japan is too closely linked to other Western peacebuilders to be considered an alternative model.

The paper is divided into five sections. First, we engage with the literature on post-liberal peacebuilding and its alternatives. Second, we briefly outline the methodology of this paper. Third, we emphasize the importance of Timor-Leste as a case study, indicating that if alternative models gain traction in one of the apogee cases of liberal peacebuilding, this is indicative of structural challenges currently faced by the liberal peacebuilding paradigm. Fourth, we present an empirical discussion based on the findings in Timor-Leste. Finally, in our conclusion, we discuss what China's and Japan's engagement in Timor-Leste can teach us about shifts in peacebuilding and its future.

Post-liberal Peacebuilding and the Alternatives

In conflict and peace studies, reflections and critiques of liberal peace have persisted for over two decades. By now, a near-consensus has emerged: in the contemporary context of the declining liberal international order and the entanglement of global, regional, and local dynamics, the traditional liberal peace paradigm is steadily waning.¹¹ This paradigm has faced increasing criticism both for its effectiveness and its fundamental legitimacy. Liberal peacebuilding is widely regarded as, at best, ineffective, at worst self-defeating, and potentially even a barrier to achieving self-sustaining peace. Against

¹⁰Smith et al., "Illiberal Peace-Building in Asia".

¹¹Ikenberry, "Three Worlds".

this backdrop, looking ‘beyond liberalism’ has become the new mainstream in the field of peacebuilding.¹²

Discussions on post-liberal peace are rooted in the observed failures of liberal peacebuilding projects in many conflict-affected and fragile (CAF) states. Some studies point out that although (Western) bilateral and multilateral peacebuilders continue to demonstrate rhetorical commitments to liberal values, in practice, these values are often subordinated to strategic interests and pragmatic considerations.¹³ Particularly, following 9/11 and the global War on Terror, stabilization emerged as the dominant paradigm in global conflict management, exposing internal tensions between liberal norms and stabilization priorities.¹⁴ Equally, even textbook liberal peacebuilding efforts are inevitably reshaped through resistance and negotiations with local actors. As Wolff notes, the ‘inevitable outcome’ of liberal peacebuilding processes is some form of hybridity resulting from ongoing renegotiation through local agency.¹⁵

The discourse on post-liberal peace thus operates on two levels. On the conceptual and normative level, it questions whether liberal peace is an effective approach to managing transitions from conflict to peace. On the practical level, it examines the extent to which the liberal peace paradigm is genuinely implemented beneath its rhetorical adherence. It also considers whether the emphasis on underlying norms obscures the practical processes and dynamics at play. Three key directions seek to redefine what peace means and what it entails in post-liberal approaches.

The first direction focuses on a post-liberal peacebuilding approach that transcends liberal universalism, creating a space for the coexistence of diverse values and multiple political orders.¹⁶ In the early 1990s, when liberal peace was the dominant paradigm, the belief that ‘liberalism offered a key’ to solving the challenges faced by post-conflict societies predicated peacebuilding interventions.¹⁷ In contrast, post-liberal peacebuilding moves away from the linearity and singularity of liberal transformations, instead fostering a space for multiple possibilities rooted in local contexts.¹⁸ This includes hybrid normative orders and non-liberal ways of organizing post-conflict societies that go beyond the liberal script of democracy, market economies, globalization, secular states, and Westphalian/Weberian state structures.¹⁹

¹²Finkenbusch, “‘Post-Liberal’ Peacebuilding and the Crisis of International Authority”, 248.

¹³Walton, “The Case for Strategic Traditionalism”.

¹⁴Karlsrud, “From Liberal Peacebuilding to Stabilization and Counterterrorism”.

¹⁵Wolff, “Beyond the Liberal Peace”, 280.

¹⁶Finkenbusch, “‘Post-Liberal’ Peacebuilding and the Crisis of International Authority”.

¹⁷Richmond, *A Post-Liberal Peace*, 2011.

¹⁸Paffenholz, “Perpetual Peacebuilding”.

¹⁹Richmond, “The Dilemmas of a Hybrid Peace”.

The second direction of post-liberal peacebuilding, is captured by the 'local turn' in peacebuilding.²⁰ Here scholars seek to redefine international-local power relations by promoting and emancipating local ownership.²¹ This approach is conceived as a corrective to the intrusive and disciplinary nature of liberal peace, which frequently depends on top-down implementation of blueprints and uniform measures. The post-liberal perspective underscores bottom-up 'peace formation' processes, wherein 'indigenous or local agents of peacebuilding, conflict resolution, or development operate within customary, religious, cultural, social, or local government frameworks'.²² This approach seeks to empower local actors – whether at the national, sub-national, or community level. International peacebuilding, in this approach, operates in ways that are 'participatory, empathetic, locally owned, and self-sustaining – socially, politically, economically, and environmentally'.²³

These two directions are clearly closely interconnected, collectively pointing towards 'alternatives' that transcend the experiences and normative preferences of Western peacebuilders, seeking to de-stigmatize the non-liberal and the local. Within these ideas, one more radical shift involves moving beyond the Westphalian-Weberian state model. For instance, Jackson argued for a radical transformation, suggesting that post-liberal peacebuilding enshrines pacifism, where 'both the legitimation of, and the means of 'violence have been effectively removed from the political sphere'.²⁴ Richmond also discussed post-liberal peacebuilding 'beyond Westphalia,' transcending the notions of 'territorially bounded, sovereign, and state-centric international space', and expanding the space for the 'everyday,' society, and community in conceptions of peace.²⁵ These discussions profoundly reveal how the conflicts and fragility we witness today are deeply rooted in the structures and concepts within which the world operates.

The third direction is closely related to the rise of non-Western powers. There are multiple ways to characterize the so-called non-Western powers, such as Southern countries, emerging powers, post-colonial countries, authoritarian/illiberal powers, and Asian countries, including among others China, Japan, Russia, Turkey, and the Gulf countries.²⁶ Although definitions and classifications vary, the existing discussions highlight a notable trend in the international system. Countries that were once peripheral to the dominant liberal peacebuilding framework – those with limited

²⁰Mac Ginty and Richmond, "The Local Turn in Peace Building".

²¹Richmond, "A Post-Liberal Peace", July 2009.

²²Richmond, "Failed Statebuilding versus Peace Formation", 383.

²³Richmond, "A Post-Liberal Peace", July 2009, 572.

²⁴Jackson, "Post-Liberal Peacebuilding and the Pacifist State", 1.

²⁵Richmond, "A Post-Liberal Peace", July 2009, 569.

²⁶Peter and Rice, "Non-Western Approaches to Peacemaking and Peacebuilding: State-of-the-Art and an Agenda for Research"; Adu et al., "Non-Western Peacekeeping as a Factor of a Multipolar World".

leverage or interest in conflict management – are now adopting a more active role in engagement with CAF states. Their involvement, however, is shaped by distinct strategic priorities, policy tools, and conceptualizations of peace. Rather than adhering to established liberal models, these actors pursue approaches that reflect their own geopolitical interests and interpretations of conflict resolution. Research highlights that there are significant differences among these non-Western peacebuilding actors, with their interventions often being regionally focused and geographically proximate.²⁷ Moreover, these countries generally lack clear policy frameworks and institutional apparatus for managing conflict and fragility.²⁸ Also, there is a certain degree of commonality with liberal peace, particularly in their designs based on the Westphalian system and the convergence with selective liberal practices. For these reasons, they remain far from constituting a coherent alternative to liberal peace. Yet, their emerging role in peacebuilding presents a valuable area of inquiry: What insights can be extracted from China and Japan's practices in Timor-Leste, and to what extent can these two countries be considered as offering alternative models to the liberal peacebuilding paradigm?

Building on our guiding research questions, this article contributes to the evolving peacebuilding literature in three interrelated ways. First, by examining the concrete practices of China and Japan in their engagement with Timor-Leste, we provide empirically grounded insights into how these actors operationalize their respective approaches to peacebuilding and state-building. Both countries have been identified in existing literature as potential sources of alternative models to the liberal peacebuilding paradigm, which is increasingly critiqued as being in retreat. Our findings offer a timely assessment of the extent to which these so-called alternatives are materializing in practice, thereby informing ongoing debates about the plurality and durability of peacebuilding models in a changing global order.²⁹

Second, our analysis speaks directly to the expanding body of scholarship on China's growing role in international peacebuilding. While much of this literature has focused on China's strategic positioning in Africa, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia³⁰, we shift the empirical lens to Timor-Leste, as we discuss later, a well-known case to the liberal peacebuilding paradigm, thereby broadening the geographical and contextual scope of inquiry. Based on our findings, we argue that, despite discursive aspirations, China's current peacebuilding engagement in Timor-Leste does not yet

²⁷Jütersonke et al., "Norm Contestation and Normative Transformation in Global Peacebuilding Order(s)"; Adhikari, "Non-Western Engagement in Peace Processes and the Rise of "Hedging" by Elites in Conflict-Affected States".

²⁸Kobayashi, "Japanese Pathways to Peacebuilding"; Yuan, "Chinese Pathways to Peacebuilding".

²⁹Kobayashi, Krause, and Yuan, "(Re)Setting the Boundaries of Peacebuilding in a Changing Global Order".

³⁰Abb, "Is There a Chinese 'Developmental Peace'?"

amount to a coherent or viable alternative to liberal peacebuilding. This empirical grounding enables a more measured reading of China's role – one that tempers speculation with observed practice.

Third, our work adds to the emerging literature on Japan's evolving peacebuilding posture, particularly in the post-Abe era.³¹ Timor-Leste serves as a compelling case to explore how Japan's approach remains deeply enmeshed within the liberal peacebuilding paradigm, while also exhibiting distinct characteristics. By placing Japan and China in comparative perspective, we highlight not only their divergences and convergences but also demonstrate that peacebuilding practices increasingly unfold along a spectrum, rather than within fixed paradigmatic boundaries³², where actors draw selectively on liberal and illiberal norms in context-specific ways.

Tracing practices entails attending to the patterned behaviours and the forms of knowledge, tacit, embodied, or strategic, that inform the decisions and actions of individuals.³³ Although recent studies have begun to challenge the normative assumptions of peacekeeping and UN missions³⁴, we draw on these emerging, field-oriented insights to contribute a practice-sensitive perspective to the study of peacebuilding and state-building, with a specific focus on Timor-Leste.

Taken together, these contributions respond to and extend recent critical scholarship that seeks to localize peacebuilding by interrogating the modalities of non-Western actors. By foregrounding original empirical evidence from Timor-Leste, our study contributes to a more differentiated understanding of contemporary peacebuilding, one that moves beyond binary distinctions and acknowledges the hybrid, contested, and adaptive nature of post-conflict engagement.

From Peacebuilding to State-building: What Timor-Leste Can Teach Us

Timor-Leste occupies a paradoxical position in the contemporary peacebuilding landscape. Frequently celebrated as a liberal peacebuilding success story³⁵, it simultaneously exemplifies the inherent contradictions and limitations of the paradigm.³⁶ Between 1999 and 2012, the country hosted seven sequential UN political missions, in addition to two Australian-led peacekeeping operations, hallmarks of a process embedded in and oriented towards the direction taken by the journey of the liberal peacebuilding

³¹ Uesugi and Kobayashi, "Japan's Peacebuilding under the Abe Administration".

³² de Coning, "Adaptive Peacebuilding".

³³ Pouliot, "Practice Tracing".

³⁴ Hagemann, "The Power of Practices".

³⁵ Asahi, "A Success Model or an Uneasy Future for Peacebuilding?"

³⁶ Chopra, "Building State Failure in East Timor".

paradigm. At the core of this engagement was the liberal peacebuilding paradigm that sought to put into place technocratic institution-building, democratic governance, and economic sustainability.³⁷ Thereby, peacebuilding in Timor-Leste became synonymous with state-building. One of the outcomes of this approach is the establishment of the Timorese Petroleum Fund, a rules-based, transparency-oriented mechanism intended to safeguard natural resource revenues and ensure intergenerational equity. Variants of this model have since been found also in other post-conflict contexts³⁸, reflecting the exportable appeal of Timor-Leste's institutional architecture. Yet the very mechanism that has underpinned the country's political settlement now reveals the fragility of a peace dependent on finite extractive rents³⁹, as the fund faces likely depletion within the coming decade.⁴⁰ This reality casts doubt on the long-term viability of the liberal peacebuilding paradigm where peace dividends are tightly coupled with political conditionalities embedded in state-building logics, rather than embedded within adaptive or context-responsive political processes. This then opens space for questioning whether the engagement of China and Japan in Timor-Leste today offer an alternative or not to this liberal peacebuilding model?

The peacebuilding process in Timor-Leste exemplifies noteworthy national and local agency. The government has embedded customary practices into its mechanisms for conflict prevention and resolution.⁴¹ Timor-Leste has proactively engaged in international affairs, particularly by reshaping its relationships with donors and international economic institutions. In 2010, Timor-Leste hosted the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding, which led to the establishment of the G7+ group.⁴² This organization aims to share experiences and foster mutual support among CAF countries, with its secretariat based in Dili since its inception. The G7+ has expanded to encompass 20 member states and was granted UN observer status in 2019. Moreover, Timor-Leste is progressing its applications to accede to the ASEAN and the WTO, thereby demonstrating its commitment to enhancing its integration into regional and global networks.

Although China and Japan were engaged in Timor-Leste from the outset, largely through support to multilateral missions and humanitarian assistance, their interventions between 1999–2012 did not constitute a meaningful departure from the prevailing liberal script. Rather than offering coherent alternatives, both actors operated within the parameters of the liberal framework. An analysis of the UN Security Council discussions shows that China

³⁷Blanco, *Peace as Government*.

³⁸Rustad and Lujala, *High-Value Natural Resources and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding*.

³⁹Smith, "Local Peace Governance in Post-War Timor-Leste".

⁴⁰Kingsbury, "Timor-Leste's Financial Cliff Draws Closer in 2025".

⁴¹Wallis, "A Liberal-Local Hybrid Peace Project in Action?"

⁴²Da Costa, "G7+ and the New Deal".

and Japan spoke favourably of all the UN missions and have consistently voted in favour of mandate extension. China and Japan contributed personnel, logistical and financial support to the missions – a fact Japan has proudly mentioned in numerous meetings.⁴³ Japan increasingly supported, although hesitant, the liberal peacebuilding framework in Timor-Leste. Japan had to amend its constitution to send Engineering Groups of the Self-Defence Forces to Timor-Leste and was only able to do so with finding a testing ground for its novel ‘human security’ approach.⁴⁴ Additionally, Japanese diplomats figured in the leadership positions of two UN missions in Timor. From 1999 until 2002, Shin-ichi Suzuki served as Special Advisor on Development and Humanitarian Affairs to Sergio Viera de Mello, who then was the acting Special Representative of the Secretary-General. More importantly, Japan from the beginning deployed development assistance in parallel to stabilization efforts, in which JICA developed a series of training programs that were accessible to public servants. As argued, Japan attempted to contribute ‘to peace and prosperity through cooperation for non-military purposes’ and to promote ‘human security’.⁴⁵ China’s growing participation in UN peacekeeping missions globally can be exemplified by the case of Timor-Leste, with China deploying 207 police officers to UNMISSET between 2000 and 2006, as well as 30 police officers and observers to UNMIT 2006 and 2008, and 24 police officers between 2010 and 2011.⁴⁶ In convergence to (Western) mainstream peacebuilders, China also provided direct military assistance to the national army.⁴⁷ China focused on funding infrastructure projects, including accommodation for the Timorese military, the headquarters of the armed forces, the Ministry of Defense, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as the Presidential Palace. However, little attention is given to what that means for how and why Japan and China are ‘doing’ peacebuilding the way they are in Timor-Leste.

Japan’s engagement, is increasingly being shaped through close alignment with Western donors and multilateral institutions, reproducing the normative and operational assumptions of liberal peacebuilding, even when delivered through distinct practices that support the normative socialization of Japan’s approach to peacebuilding. China’s presence, by contrast, as we demonstrate below, although growing through bilateral aid and economic ventures, remains fragmented and under-institutionalized. While it occasionally creates space for local actors to articulate preferences diverging from dominant Western discourses, it does not yet cohere into an alternative peacebuilding model.

⁴³“The Situation in East Timor”.

⁴⁴Kikkawa, “Japan and East Timor”; Fujishige, Uesugi, and Honda, *Japan’s Peacekeeping at a Crossroads*.

⁴⁵Hasegawa and Yamada, “Evaluation of Japan’s ODA to the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste”, 23.

⁴⁶Lanteigne, “A Change in Perspective”.

⁴⁷Storey, “China’s Inroads into East Timor”.

Thus, we argue that the practices of Chinese and Japanese actors in Timor-Leste do not so much displace liberal peacebuilding as they reinforce its enduring gravitational pull, nowadays capturing its adaptivity and characterization on a spectrum. Timor-Leste, then, offers a cautionary tale about the limits of liberal-oriented and technocratic peacebuilding and the premature optimism in offering full-blown transformative models surrounding so-called emerging alternatives, whether these are practiced by China or Japan.

Methods and Data Collection

We present a detailed comparative analysis of China's and Japan's engagements in Timor-Leste. This analysis is based on fieldwork conducted in 2023, which included over 50 interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Interviewees included Timorese government representatives, UN representatives of various specialized agencies, academics, representatives from three top donor Embassies, bilateral aid agencies, and international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs). All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement. For these expert interviews, we followed the method of snowballing.⁴⁸ In addition, documents from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of China and Japan, country reports of the UN, the World Bank and other multilateral organizations were consulted, and speeches at the UN Security Council on Timor-Leste were reviewed. Finally, some of the respondents invited the authors to participate in various events, where the authors could observe the ways in which international donors, particularly Japan, would engage in peacebuilding practices.

Representatives from the Chinese Embassy and state-owned companies, except for one interview, were not accessible for interviews, reflecting a broader tendency of Chinese diplomacy to remain low-profile and closed to external scrutiny. To mitigate potential biases arising from this limitation, we employed a triangulation approach, cross-referencing objective data with inter-subjective views gathered from diverse stakeholders. First, we systematically collected and organized extensive online reports and data on China's projects in Timor-Leste, culminating in a curated dataset. The dataset compiles projects that could count towards peacebuilding activities of China, based on an assessment of various publicly available sources, including Timor-Leste's Aid Transparency Portal, ChinaAid, which captures 20,985 projects of China across 165 low – and middle-income countries, including Timor-Leste, from 2000–2021 totalling to USD 1.34 trillion, and websites of all present UN agencies in Timor-Leste.⁴⁹ The collection of these allowed the

⁴⁸Soest, "Why Do We Speak to Experts?"; Cohen and Arieli, "Field Research in Conflict Environments".

⁴⁹"Aid Transparency Portal"; Dreher et al., "Aid, China, and Growth".

authors to triangulate the identified and other Chinese projects during the fieldwork. In addition, we consistently inquired about Chinese involvement in Timor-Leste from local NGOs, government officials, UN staff, and personnel from multilateral development banks and Western Embassies. This approach allowed us to cross-verify our database while capturing interlocutors' perceptions of China, shaped by their specific institutional and professional positions. Additionally, we visited sites of Chinese-funded projects to gain a firsthand understanding of their activities. The same methodology was applied to our analysis of Japan's engagement. However, in the case of Japan, we benefited from a substantial body of firsthand data due to Japan's relatively transparent and systematic information-sharing practices, as well as our granted access to the Japanese Embassy and JICA. Our methodology acknowledges the limitations of firsthand data availability on China, which may introduce certain biases. Nonetheless, within these constraints, we have endeavoured to construct a well-rounded understanding of what China is doing in Timor-Leste and its local implications.

Developmental Peace in Practice: Within or Beyond the Liberal Peacebuilding Paradigm?

Development-oriented Peacebuilding Through Infrastructures

China has provided substantial support to numerous infrastructural projects within Timor-Leste, including the Presidential Palace, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, the headquarters of the Armed Forces, and the Ministry of Defence. Currently, a Chinese corporation is undertaking the construction of the new Ministry of Justice.⁵⁰ The way China advances infrastructure in Timor-Leste is predominantly through its domestic business sector. Since the early 2000s, domestic Chinese businesses, including those in the energy and construction sectors, have been encouraged by the Chinese central government to pursue new market opportunities abroad.⁵¹ This broader initiative by Chinese domestic companies is understood within the broader context of China's 'Going Out' policy, which aims to encourage Chinese enterprises to participate in the development of third countries.⁵² Timor-Leste, a CAF state with a considerable need for economic development, is an exemplar of the implementation of said policy. During our research, an international peacebuilder asserted that Chinese companies 'are very aggressive in identifying business opportunities'.⁵³ In conversation with representatives of a Chinese multinational

⁵⁰TL47 23/07/2023.

⁵¹TL47 23/07/2023.

⁵²Wang, "A Deeper Look at China's 'Going Out' Policy".

⁵³TL36 12/07/2023.

corporation, it was emphasized that Timor-Leste remains significantly underdeveloped.⁵⁴ When their company provided infrastructural support to Timor-Leste, they emphasized that enhancing the well-being of the Timorese people would contribute to the promotion of peace and the development of the nation. This sentiment was reiterated during a recent meeting between Timorese President Xanana Gusmao and Chinese business representatives, wherein the President underscored the significance of enhancing 'infrastructure related to roads, water, airports, agriculture, fisheries, and the oil and gas sector, particularly the exploration of the greater sunrise'.⁵⁵ China's endeavours for infrastructure development in Timor-Leste, encompassing government buildings, the Tibar harbour, the energy grid network and roads, signify that China's initiatives to advance Timor-Leste are predicated on infrastructure projects, which are spearheaded by Chinese companies. China sees the improvement of infrastructure as central in advancing development, a guiding pillar of China's understanding of peacebuilding.

Japan similarly prioritises the construction of bridges, port facilities, the newly planned international airport in Dili, roads, water, irrigation systems, and schools.⁵⁶ According to one interview, over the time span of 20 years from 2002 until 2022, Japan committed over USD 272 million in infrastructure projects.⁵⁷ In a manner like China, when Japan engages in infrastructural projects for Timor-Leste, these projects are regarded as 'closed projects'.⁵⁸ This term refers to the practice of Japanese companies, who have accumulated technical expertise over time, implementing diverse infrastructures 'as closely as possible with businesses from Japan'.⁵⁹

The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is the primary actor in Japan's approach to development-oriented peacebuilding, with representatives holding authority over infrastructure projects.⁶⁰ The JICA office in Dili is responsible for hiring Japanese consultants and subsequently subcontracting Japanese companies to construct the infrastructure project. The close relationship between JICA, the Japanese Embassy who delegated authority over the infrastructural sector in Timor-Leste to JICA, and the close relationship to the Japanese private sector, then underlines an 'all-Japan' approach whereby the government seeks to cooperate with the private sector to amplify the impact of its peacebuilding interventions.⁶¹ A second actor that practices the construction of infrastructures for Japan are UN

⁵⁴TL47 23/07/2023.

⁵⁵"Government Invites Chinese Investors to Invest in Timor-Leste".

⁵⁶"Timor-Leste and Japan 20 Years' Experience of Cooperation".

⁵⁷TL32 10/07/2023.

⁵⁸TL44 20/07/2023.

⁵⁹TL44 20/07/2023.

⁶⁰TL20 15/06/2023; TL32 10/07/2023.

⁶¹"Peacebuilding and Japan", 35.

specialized agencies such as the UN Development Program (UNDP). Such coordination between the Japanese Embassy and UN specialized agencies would materialize when Japan wanted to contribute to an infrastructural project but not undertake it itself. This has been observed in the Japanese-funded project, *COVID-Resilient Elections in Timor-Leste*, where Japanese funds were utilized to establish new electoral management bodies. As various interviews have clarified, Japan seeks to avoid involvement in ‘political sensitive activities’ and instead pursue ‘soft engagements’ such as the construction of schools and bridges.⁶² Japan’s non-involvement in political affairs then is a conscious choice that they follow in their peacebuilding engagements globally.⁶³ Thirdly, Japan invokes infrastructure projects in Timor-Leste through its Grassroots Human Security Projects (GGP), in which it annually awards up to seven grants for local NGOs. As identified through fieldwork, the Japanese Embassy even has one staff member who is entirely responsible for the GGP. Japan mobilizes the GGP on a global scale to support peacebuilding.⁶⁴ The GGP projects allow Japan’s Embassy to have regular engagements with various local civil society organizations. The network of Japanese peacebuilders in Timor spans from government representatives to development workers (JICA) to civil society to employees of Japanese consulting and construction firms.

Infrastructure is not a distinguishing feature of either China’s or Japan’s approach to peacebuilding. Historically entrenched in the construction of modern statehood, infrastructure has long been central to international state-building efforts.⁶⁵ As Bachmann and Schouten note, ‘Infrastructure has become a prime tool in so-called stabilization efforts in fragile and conflict-affected settings across the globe’.⁶⁶ This connection is also affirmed in operational reports from specialized UN agencies such as UNOPS, which explicitly link infrastructure investments to peacebuilding objectives.⁶⁷ Equally, in 2023, OECD DAC members allocated a significant share of their total overseas development assistance to fragile contexts, with 40%, equivalent to USD 20.5 billion, directed towards social infrastructure and services, and an additional 10.5% (USD 5.3 billion) to economic infrastructure and services, across the 61 fragile contexts identified in the OECD’s 2025 fragility framework.⁶⁸ The construction of roads, administrative buildings, and bridges by Chinese and Japanese entities in Timor-Leste reflects then long-established and still contemporary liberal peacebuilding

⁶²TL39 17/07/2023; TL44 20/07/2023.

⁶³Kobayashi, “Japanese Pathways to Peacebuilding”.

⁶⁴Dollah et al., “Japan’s Advocacy for Human Security in Global Politics”.

⁶⁵Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.

⁶⁶Bachmann and Schouten, “Concrete Approaches to Peace”, 381.

⁶⁷Fantini et al., “Infrastructure for Peacebuilding: The Role of Infrastructure in Tackling the Underlying Drivers of Fragility”.

⁶⁸OECD, *States of Fragility 2025*, 128.

practices in Timor-Leste and beyond.⁶⁹ From the Marshall Plan to post-9/11 interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, infrastructure has been employed to ‘extend state authority by facilitating access for security forces and administrative personnel to conflict areas, as well as equipping these agencies with administrative infrastructures’.⁷⁰ Infrastructural projects often provide both the donor and the host government with the assurance of immediate, visible impact – whether by enabling children to attend school or granting pregnant women access to health facilities once construction is complete – while also supporting or restoring the rule of law. Although China and Japan may not explicitly frame their infrastructural engagements within the normative paradigm of liberal peacebuilding, their practices remain deeply ‘political, rather than purely technical’, in nature.⁷¹ Their emphasis on development-oriented peace may signal a different aspirational endpoint than that of the liberal norms underpinning the peacebuilding paradigm, which remain the primary focus for Western actors such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), UNDP, and various INGOs operating in Timor-Leste. However, the means of achieving these objectives, namely, the instrumental use of infrastructure to project and consolidate state authority, remain consistent with liberal peacebuilding orthodoxies. In this regard, neither China nor Japan can be seen to articulate or enact a genuinely alternative model to the liberal peacebuilding paradigm. Their practices echo, rather than contest, the liberal paradigm’s material and symbolic strategies, from Mali to the DRC, and from Somalia to Afghanistan. In Timor-Leste, which as indicated above, is often held up as a paradigmatic case of peacebuilding success, infrastructure continues to function as both a vehicle for extending state presence into peripheral regions and as a tangible way through which citizens encounter the state, whether through schools, health clinics, or election monitoring centres. Thus, China and Japan do not so much disrupt the liberal peacebuilding paradigm as they participate in its ongoing adaptation.

Development-oriented Peacebuilding Through Livelihood Support

Japan and China both support the Timorese people in terms of their livelihoods. The enhancement of livelihoods by them illustrates how they think that peacebuilding should be achieved, with the promotion of development being a central tenet in any response – whether it is under the Japanese mantra of ‘peace through development’⁷² or the Chinese concept of ‘developmental peace’. The significance of livelihood support in the context of

⁶⁹TL5 19/04/2023; TL16 27/04/2023; TL21 04/07/2023; Schouten and Bachmann, “Roads to Peace?”

⁷⁰Bachmann and Schouten, “Concrete Approaches to Peace”, 381.

⁷¹Bachmann and Schouten, 383.

⁷²“Peacebuilding Assistance”.

peacebuilding by these two actors is underscored by the observation of the ADB that “Timor-Leste is predominantly an agrarian economy, with 66% of households engaged in some form of subsistence agriculture.”⁷³

Japan and its various actors comprising its peacebuilding network, ranging from the Embassy to JICA and the numerous Japanese NGOs operating in Timor-Leste, place a primary emphasis on livelihood support. First, the Japanese Embassy allocates funds to a variety of projects administered by UN specialized agencies, such as the UNDP or the World Food Programme, with the objective of enhancing food security and agricultural yields for farmers.⁷⁴ In this regard, when Japan allocates funding to UN specialized agencies or other multinational institutions such as the ADB or the World Bank through its Japan Social Development Fund, it assumes the role of a donor, not an implementer, of the projects. Second, JICA’s livelihood engagement involves the implementation of projects focused on food security and agricultural development. In numerous instances, JICA representatives have emphasized the significance of livelihood enhancement in facilitating the development trajectory of Timor-Leste, as well as the capacity-building potential of training programmes for beneficiaries.⁷⁵ Consequently, Japanese consultants frequently visit beneficiary communities to offer training modules on agricultural practices, including rice and cacao farming, and crop management. Third, a series of Japanese NGOs are funded by Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), or were previously funded by the MoFA, and engage in livelihood improvements. A notable case study is provided by *Café Letefoho*, a prominent coffee shop in Dili that has been supported by Peace Winds International, an NGO funded by the MoFA. This initiative has facilitated the sustainable livelihoods of a local community, who were previously a CAF community and are now engaged in coffee production on a plantation funded by Japanese public funds.⁷⁶ As was revealed during field research, there are numerous other examples of Japanese NGOs and MoFA funds being used to support and empower communities, including flower farms and seaweed farms.⁷⁷

On China, our assessment identified that China has provided support for the development of agriculture in Timor. In 2015, it dispatched four trainers from the China National Bamboo Research Centre to provide capacity building to Timorese farmers in the cultivation of bamboo. This is in line with China’s broader approach to development, which draws strongly on capacity building rather than in-kind or financial contributions. This approach is

⁷³Iyengar, “Addressing Timor-Leste’s Food Security and Nutrition”.

⁷⁴“Japan Pledges USD \$3 Million to WFP to Support Emergency Food Security in Timor-Leste”; “UNDP Timor-Leste and the Embassy of Japan Sign \$4.8 Million Effort to Support ‘Building Small Scale Rural Infrastructures in Timor-Leste’”.

⁷⁵TL6 21/04/2023; TL32 10/07/2023; TL39 17/07/2023.

⁷⁶“East Timor: Building Composting Beds to Improve the Health of the Coffee Trees”.

⁷⁷TL38 17/07/2023; TL40 18/07/2023.

further emphasized in recent high-level bilateral meetings between China and Timor-Leste, as evidenced by recent speeches.⁷⁸ These speeches highlight livelihood support as a key area of intervention, underscoring a commitment to enhance the quality of life for the Timorese people. Another aspect of China's commitment to enhancing livelihoods is evidenced by the deployment of medical teams to Timor-Leste, thereby bolstering the national health system of the nation.

Both China and Japan approach peacebuilding in Timor-Leste with an emphasis on livelihood support, recognizing it as a necessary element in fostering sustainable peace and socioeconomic development. Their initiatives, aimed at improving the economic conditions of Timorese communities, reflect a shared understanding that peacebuilding must include tangible benefits for everyday life, rather than focusing on classical norms within the liberal peacebuilding paradigm such as democracy or human rights. However, these practices do not constitute a break from the liberal peacebuilding paradigm. On the contrary, livelihood support has become an increasingly prominent focus among traditional peacebuilding actors as well. A recent *Interpeace* report, for instance, highlights the growing emphasis placed by a Western peacebuilding agency on supporting livelihoods in CAF contexts.⁷⁹ In Timor-Leste, key liberal peacebuilders such as UNDP or the EU have supported efforts to empower marginalized groups, particularly women and youth, through livelihood-oriented programming.⁸⁰ Hence, the projects of Japan to support communities through coffee plantations or China's efforts to enhance the capacities for sustainable agroforestry, are within the margins of the ever-adapting liberal peacebuilding paradigm, rather than offering an alternative model confronting it.

Constructing Peace: For What Purpose?

While it is common for China and Japan to involve their domestic business sectors in the construction of infrastructure projects in Timor-Leste, their motivations behind the engagements are distinct. China's primary motivation is economic, while Japan's approach to constructing peace is more grounded in its policy of supporting national ownership and embracing Japan's human security framework.

The Chinese are quite aggressive in identifying business opportunities within the infrastructural sector in Timor-Leste. As reported by two

⁷⁸"Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste on Establishing Comprehensive Strategic Partnership"; "Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste on Strengthening Comprehensive Strategic Partnership".

⁷⁹"Livelihoods for Peace".

⁸⁰TL13 26/04/2023; TL16 27/04/2023.

respondents from a Chinese multilateral corporation, it was their assessment of the status quo of Timor's energy network that led them to approach the Timorese government. They indicated that 'Sometimes we have to be aggressive, as otherwise the smallest wolf would not eat.'⁸¹ While not part of the official state structure, these representatives then use narratives of the Chinese wolf warrior diplomacy.⁸² The representatives further elaborated that following their company's assessment, they engaged with government officials, presenting their projects and their financial offer. While highlighting the challenges they faced in successfully implementing the project within the limited timeframe provided by the Timorese government, the representatives emphasized that they sourced all the necessary materials and human resources from China. This case suggests that Chinese companies may have a significant influence on the agenda of the host government. As reported by one of our respondents, Chinese corporations preying on the bidding processes of multilateral organizations, such as the ADB, and seeking to secure contracts with bilateral agencies, including the JICA.⁸³ Another respondent reported the *modus operandi* of deploying and sourcing from Chinese supply chains to Timor for the entirety of the construction process, concluding that 'When they come to Timor-Leste, for any type of construction, most their operations come and go. Hence, they do not leave anything behind apart from very little maintenance presence.'⁸⁴ The findings suggest that Chinese companies can offer the Timorese government and other donors two distinct advantages, which is determinant in their practice of engaging in infrastructure projects. Firstly, they can deliver projects within short timeframes. Secondly, they can offer lower bids than competing companies. Hence, these Chinese companies view Timor-Leste's development as a potential opportunity for their own financial gain. However, the assertive behaviour of these Chinese companies is not without consequence. It has been argued that this behaviour can be used as a political tool in the hands of the host country on the international stage, attracting attention from donors for potential overseas development assistance, as evidenced by the political manoeuvring surrounding the Greater Sunrise natural gas field development and other projects related to the Belt and Road Initiative.⁸⁵

In contrast, the Japanese approach to infrastructure projects in Timor-Leste involves request-oriented engagements with the host government. As reported by respondents from the Timorese government, the Japanese Embassy, and JICA, there are consistent engagements between them.⁸⁶

⁸¹ TL47 23/07/2023.

⁸² Yuan, "Tracing China's Diplomatic Transition to Wolf Warrior Diplomacy and Its Implications".

⁸³ TL26 07/07/2023.

⁸⁴ TL20 15/06/2023.

⁸⁵ da Cruz Cardoso, "Timor-Leste-China Relations"; Varadhan, "Exclusive".

⁸⁶ TL6 21/04/2023; TL17 28/04/2023; TL18 28/04/2023; TL32 10/07/2023; TL33 10/07/2023; TL36 12/07/2023.

These engagements take various forms, including intergovernmental meetings between the host government and the donor. Representatives from various line ministries, such as those responsible for public works and agriculture, present their respective needs. In collaboration with representatives from the Japanese Embassy and JICA, they then formulate projects for development. This collaborative endeavour, as evidenced by the Timorese government's assertion of authority over infrastructure project prioritization, mirrors established collaborative models. Consequently, there is a notable congruence between Japan's intervention and the priorities delineated in the 2011–2030 Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan.

It is also important to note that Japan has identified specific areas of infrastructure as being of particular importance, including but not limited to roads, schools and healthcare facilities. In the Japanese understanding of human security, which is defined in development-oriented terms, the underdevelopment of basic infrastructure is a central hindrance to achieving human security.⁸⁷ Consequently, the various initiatives undertaken by Japan's peacebuilding network in Timor-Leste have been focused on sectors such as education, water and sanitation, and healthcare, aligning with the global priorities of the GGP program. Consequently, the involvement of Japanese NGOs such as Services for Health in Asian & African Regions (SHARE), PARC Interpeoples' Cooperation (PARCIC), or Peace Winds International, in conjunction with the deployment of JICA or funding from the Japanese Embassy, signifies a human-security oriented approach that empowers Timorese society to assume ownership.

The approaches of China and Japan to infrastructure construction in Timor-Leste reveal important differences in motivation and alignment with the liberal peacebuilding paradigm. China's involvement is largely driven by economic self-interest, with state-linked corporations seeking to capitalize on Timor-Leste's underdevelopment. This contrasts with Japan's engagement, which embraces Western peacebuilding efforts, emphasizes human security, while distancing itself from political development. Although both countries invest in similar projects, such as roads, government buildings, and hospitals, their underlying purposes diverge: China pursues market opportunities and profit maximization, while Japan, like other liberal peacebuilders, frames its assistance around community needs and development goals.

This distinction reflects broader trends, such as those observed in comparisons between China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Marshall Plan.⁸⁸ In this sense, China's infrastructure-driven strategy may appear to diverge from the liberal peacebuilding model by prioritising economic gain over

⁸⁷"Human Security".

⁸⁸Shen and Chan, "A Comparative Study of the Belt and Road Initiative and the Marshall Plan".

political or institutional transformation. However, despite this variation, China's practices in Timor-Leste remain underdeveloped as a coherent peacebuilding model. Japan, meanwhile, remains embedded within the liberal peacebuilding framework. Thus, while China's economic motivations set it apart in rhetoric and purpose, neither country's practices in Timor-Leste amount to a substantive departure from the liberal peacebuilding paradigm.

In or Out? Embeddedness with the Peacebuilding Landscape in Timor-Leste

In Timor-Leste, China's approach is marked by an aversion to engaging with the broader peacebuilding community. This tendency is indicative of a preference for isolationism, as evidenced by the country's reluctance to participate in formal or informal donor coordination efforts, whether initiated by the Timor-Leste government or the broader donor community. According to multiple respondents, the Chinese delegation's participation, if it occurs at all, is characterized by a passive observation from the sidelines, as reported by various respondents.⁸⁹ Despite this, some other peacebuilders have expressed intentions to engage with the Chinese, yet their efforts have consistently met with what has been reported as 'a complete absence of donor coordination'.⁹⁰ Instead, they demonstrate a preference for bilateral engagements between the host government and their representatives, aligning with the global tendency among Chinese diplomats to favour bilateral meetings over multilateral ones. This phenomenon is not exclusive to peacebuilding but rather reflects a more general aspect of Chinese diplomatic conduct, as evidenced by numerous scholars.⁹¹ Even within the Timorese government, this engagement is selective. As respondents from line ministries reported to us, 'China is completely off-budget. As such, this means that we do not know what they do.'⁹² Consequently, China isolates itself from the community of practice of international peacebuilders and the host government. It is only the highest representatives of the Timorese government who have articulated a positive relationship with China, stating that 'With China, we [Timor-Leste] have a very good relationship.'⁹³ So, the Chinese Embassy is detached from any peacebuilding networks, while only embedded with the highest officials of the host government.

Similarly, when multilateral or bilateral agencies contract Chinese companies for infrastructural purposes, a respondent argued that 'Most of our

⁸⁹TL13 26/04/2023; TL44 20/07/2023; TL50 25/07/2023.

⁹⁰TL44 20/07/2023.

⁹¹Wang, *Creative Involvement*; Zhang, "Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics".

⁹²TL35 12/07/2023.

⁹³TL48 24/07/2023.

contractors are from China. While there is no direct engagement with the Chinese Embassy, there is an indirect linkage to private businesses implementing our constructions.⁹⁴ In such rare instances where a Chinese actor, Chinese company, engages with other peacebuilders, the engagement remains minimal. Thus, the Chinese are detached as much as possible from the wider peacebuilding landscape in Timor-Leste.

Japan, in contrast, is well embedded in the community of practice of peacebuilders in Timor-Leste. The various Japanese actors, excluding the Japanese consultants or construction firms in this case, occupy a central role in both formal and informal coordination efforts, serving as co-chairs alongside the Ministry of Public Works on the host state-led technical working group on infrastructure.⁹⁵ They would be part of the informal network of peacebuilding practitioners, which is being organized by the World Bank and is recognized by other donors as a 'traditional peacebuilder'.⁹⁶ The embeddedness of Japan in the community of practice is of significance for both the Japanese Embassy and JICA. The Japanese Embassy has a strong relationship with the UNDP, with the relationship not limited to Timor-Leste, as one participant emphasized: 'With Japan, there is a series of dialogues both at the headquarters level between the UNDP and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan as well as in terms of project prioritization for Timor'.⁹⁷ The Japanese Embassy also maintains strong ties with specialized UN agencies, such as the WFP, among others. In essence, Japan seeks to cultivate close ties with UN specialized agencies, establishing unspoken guidelines that prefer Japanese managers for Japan-funded projects and stipulating that UN agencies always acknowledge Japan's contributions.⁹⁸ We observed that numerous personnel within the UNDP in Timor-Leste have previously been employed by either JICA or the Japanese Embassy, suggesting a continued influence of these entities. Moreover, we were able to observe that the Japanese Ambassador has close personal connections with various ministers of the host government, as well as with senior representatives of the UN specialized agencies.

In summary, despite the observation that 'We are a small community of donors in Timor-Leste. There is a lot of coordination and communication. A day does not pass when we do not engage with one another,' China has opted for a strategy of isolation from the community of practice of peacebuilders in Timor-Leste, preferring instead to engage in high-level meetings.⁹⁹ Conversely, Japan maintains a close collaboration with Western

⁹⁴TL26 07/07/2023.

⁹⁵TL13 26/04/2023; TL35 12/07/2023.

⁹⁶TL5 19/04/2023; TL11 25/04/2023; TL26 07/07/2023.

⁹⁷TL14 26/04/2023.

⁹⁸TL25 06/07/2023.

⁹⁹TL33 10/07/2023.

mainstream peacebuilders and is deeply integrated into the coordination efforts of the host governments. Additionally, Japan enjoys positive relations with various UN specialized agencies, particularly the UNDP. China and Japan exhibit markedly different relationships with the broader peacebuilding community in Timor-Leste. China tends to operate in isolation from this established community of practice, distancing itself from the normative and institutional frameworks that shape liberal peacebuilding. This detachment suggests a potential ambition to construct an alternative model, though such a model remains nascent and underdeveloped.¹⁰⁰ Japan, by contrast, is deeply embedded within the liberal peacebuilding paradigm. While it occasionally tests the paradigm's flexibility by pursuing its own priorities, it ultimately reinforces, rather than challenges, the liberal peacebuilding paradigm.

Conclusion

This article examined the peacebuilding and state-building practices of China and Japan in Timor-Leste, asking what insights their engagement offers and to what extent their approaches might constitute alternatives to the liberal peacebuilding paradigm. We argued that, whether they act through bilateral aid agencies, embassies, NGOs, or the private sector, neither China nor Japan currently offers a distinct or coherent alternative to the liberal model. China's approach remains underdeveloped, though it creates openings for contestation of the dominant paradigm. Japan, by contrast, is too closely aligned with Western actors to be considered a challenger.

Timor-Leste serves as an instructive case for understanding the evolving dynamics of peacebuilding. Once viewed as a model case of liberal peacebuilding, especially in the wake of successive UN political missions, Timor-Leste now finds itself at a critical juncture. With economic uncertainty on the horizon, particularly as the Petroleum Fund nears depletion, and continued inclusion among the OECD's list of fragile states¹⁰¹, the country nonetheless sustains a robust peacebuilding presence. Actors as diverse as Australia, China, Japan, the United States, South Korea, the UN, the World Bank, and the ADB remain actively engaged, underscoring Timor-Leste's continued relevance as a microcosm of broader peacebuilding trends.

Our findings suggest three key observations. First, both China and Japan invest significantly in infrastructure development in Timor-Leste. However, the emphasis on infrastructure is not unique to their approaches; it reflects a broader evolution within the liberal peacebuilding paradigm itself. From the

¹⁰⁰Foot, "Reining in a Liberal UN".

¹⁰¹OECD, *States of Fragility 2025*, 188–90.

Marshall Plan to post-conflict reconstruction in Afghanistan and Sudan, infrastructure has long served as a tool for extending state authority and shaping peace, and in fact conflict.¹⁰² In fact, economic development, has long been embedded in peacebuilding, not exclusive to the practices of China or Japan, as demonstrated by the Marshall Plan, and by more recent cases around the world, from Colombia to Uganda.¹⁰³ Thus, whether built by Chinese firms, Japanese donors, or the UNDP, roads, schools, hospitals, and administrative facilities remain core components of peacebuilding efforts.

Second, both countries support economic livelihoods, through coffee cultivation in the case of Japan or technical assistance in agroforestry by China. Yet here too, liberal peacebuilders have evolved, placing growing emphasis on livelihoods, women's economic empowerment, and youth-led enterprises. While the specific modalities differ, the underlying logic remains shared. These practices reflect adaptation within the liberal paradigm, not a departure from it.

Third, and perhaps most suggestively, China's engagement in Timor-Leste displays characteristics of a potential alternative model. Its infrastructure investments are market-driven and executed by profit-seeking firms. Moreover, Chinese actors often operate at a distance from the multilateral peacebuilding community. While not yet fully formed, China's approach hints at a model less concerned with governance or norm diffusion and more oriented around economic connectivity and strategic influence. If such a model were to develop from practice while remaining in its infancy in Timor-Leste, the model offered by China would embolden heads of state – the model's target audience – and pay less attention to the general public. This would suggest that the model is indeed indicative of 'authoritarian' or 'illiberal' engagement with CAF states rather than the liberal peacebuilding paradigm's understanding of peacebuilding.

In sum, the practices of China and Japan in Timor-Leste underscore the adaptive nature of contemporary peacebuilding. Infrastructure and livelihoods are now central components, reflecting a broader shift in the field. Neither country currently offers a fully articulated alternative to the liberal paradigm. Yet China's model, distinct in its motivations, methods, and modes of engagement, may signal the contours of a future evolution in peacebuilding practice.

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¹⁰²Lebrand et al., "Road Investment and Violence in DRC".

¹⁰³Vernon, "Peace through Prosperity".

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