

Karoline Eickhoff and Nadine Godehardt

China's Horn of Africa Initiative: Fostering or Fragmenting Peace?

Dr. Karoline Eickhoff

*Researcher at Megatrends Afrika and an Associate with the
Africa and Middle East Research Division at SWP*

Karoline.Eickhoff@swp-berlin.org

Dr. phil. Nadine Godehardt

Senior Associate with the Asia Research Division at SWP

Nadine.Godehardt@swp-berlin.org

About this Working Paper

Security cooperation has become vital for protecting China's interests and investments in Africa, especially in the geopolitically important Horn of Africa (HoA). Against this backdrop, China recently launched the 'Initiative of Peaceful Development in the Horn of Africa' and appointed its first special envoy for the region. Both steps suggest that China sees a potential opportunity to become a more prominent development and security provider in the region. As the EU and Germany currently re-evaluate their relations with China as much as with African partner countries, questions arise about the substance of the HoA initiative and what the consequences for peace and security in the region could be. This paper argues that it is important to understand these steps in a broader foreign policy context vis-à-vis China's changing mindset on the security-development nexus, as well as in terms of how China and other external actors react to one another on the ground. On the one hand, the initiative raises concerns over competing mandates and process fragmentation in a region already heavily affected by proxy conflicts and external power projection. On the other hand, China's political clout, access to hard-to-reach conflict parties, and considerable economic influence could add new dynamics to the region's various conflict settings and security issues.

Content

Deepening connections: Peace and security in China-Africa relations	1
The Horn of Africa: A strategic hub for China-Africa economic and security cooperation	2
China's 'Initiative of Peaceful Development in the Horn of Africa'	4
The changing security-development nexus in China's foreign policy	6
'Development first' and infrastructure in foreign policy	6
Building a Chinese-style international community: 'Communities of destiny'	7
Chinese thinking on security: The Global Security Initiative	8
China's approach to containing conflicts abroad	9
Peace and security in the Horn of Africa – what role for China?	10

Deepening connections: Peace and security in China-Africa relations

China-Africa relations have long been dominated by economic cooperation, development, and trade. Since 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),¹ Xi Jinping's flagship project on global connectivity, has taken centre stage in China-Africa relations: the majority of African nations (52 out of 54) have signed BRI Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) with China. And even at a time when BRI investments, since peaking around 2015, are declining in a global sense, they remain at a stable level in Africa. The continent's importance to China is also visible in Chinese official speeches in international organisations such as the United Nations Security Council. Here, Chinese policymakers increasingly collocate Africa with China: they are regarded as two sides that have developed a special bond and "belong to a community of destiny and interest."²

These developments go hand in hand with a growing Chinese interest in the overall stability of the continent, particularly in protecting its investments and expatriate workers. Consequently, not only have diplomatic ties been strengthened, relations have also increasingly extended into the field of security cooperation. In addition to the more than 40,000 Chinese peacekeepers that have served in 24 UN missions since 1989, including peace-keeping operations in South Sudan and Mali, China strongly supports regional peace and security organisations (e.g. building the headquarters of the African Union (AU) in Addis Ababa, and providing financial support to the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in East Africa Secretariat), and participates in counter-piracy measures in the Gulf of Aden. Bilaterally, China conducts joint military exercises, sells arms, supported peace mediation in Sudan and South Sudan, and, since 2017, operates a military base in Djibouti. During the most recent Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in November 2021, China and Africa committed to further intensify their cooperation in the fields of peace and security. These developments make plain that Africa has become a "prominent frontier of foreign-policy innovation"³ for China's evolving approach to integrated development and security (统筹发展和安全). The HoA, due to its economic and political importance to China, can be seen as a "litmus test"⁴ for this new approach that departs from the previously stricter non-interference foreign policy style.

¹ Godehardt, Nadine and Paul J. Kohlenberg. 2021. "China's Global Connectivity Politics". In *The Multidimensionality of Regions in World Politics*, ed. Kohlenberg, Paul J. and Nadine Godehardt. London, New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis.

² UNSC Public Meeting, S/PV.7699 (2016).

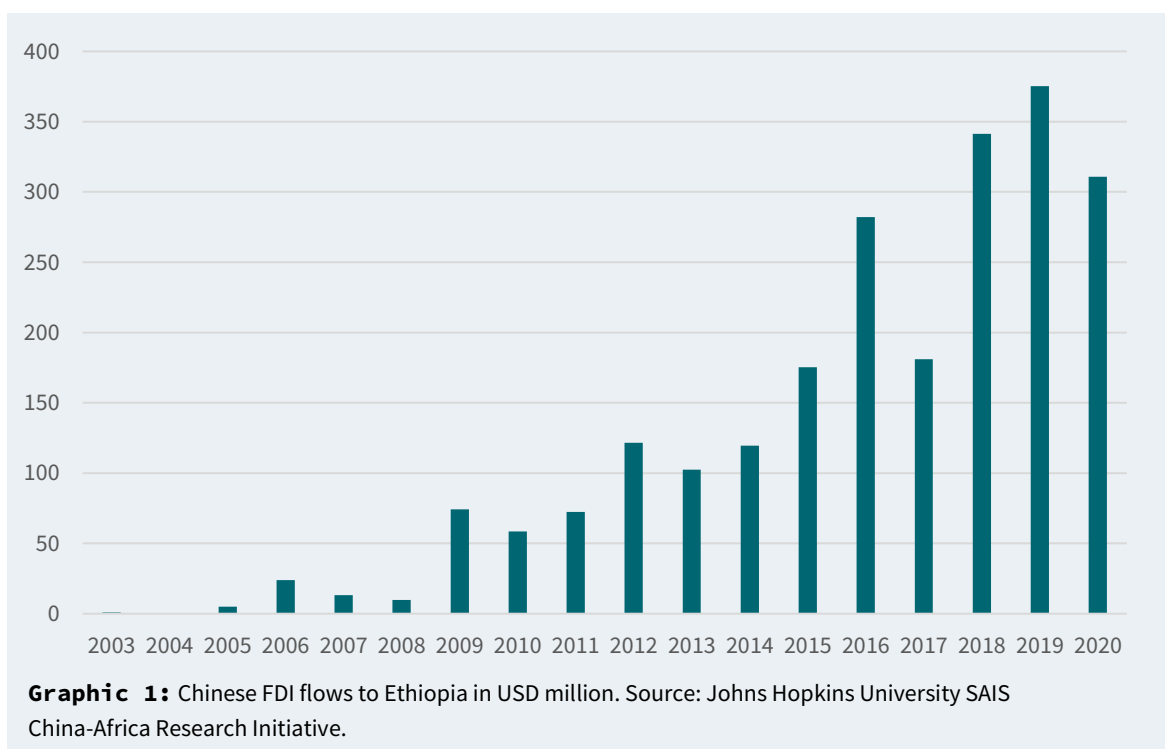
³ Large, Daniel. 2021. "China and Africa: The New Era". *China Today Series*, 171. Cambridge, Medford, MA: Polity.

⁴ Fiala, Lukas. 2021. "Why Ethiopia's Fate Matters to China". *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*. 26 November 2021.

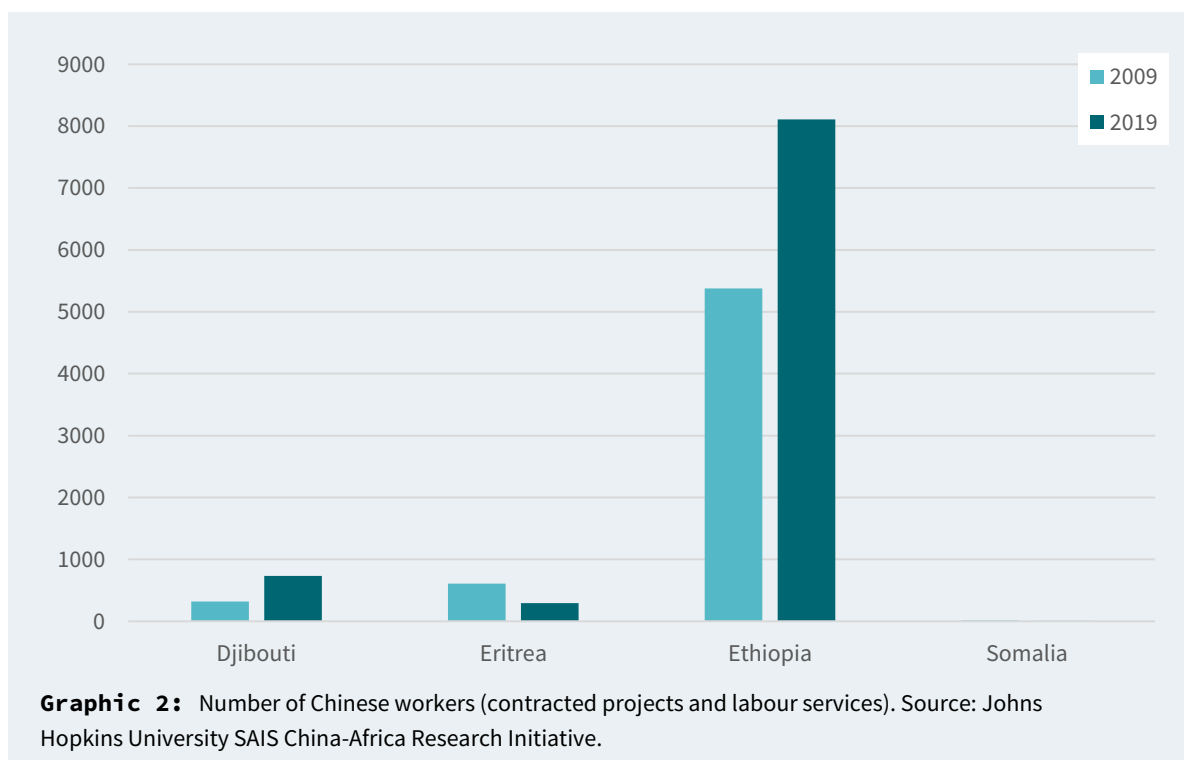
The Horn of Africa: A strategic hub for China-Africa economic and security cooperation

As the continent's easternmost part bordering the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden, the HoA is a nodal point for maritime trade. Substantial foreign investments in sea ports and naval military bases along its shores are evidence of the region's geostrategic importance for various external actors, including the U.S., European Union member states, China, India, Turkey, and the Gulf states. In a climate of global power rivalry, the region is seen by many of these actors as an important venue where geopolitical competition increasingly takes the shape of 'hard' power projection. For example, rumours about China's supposed intention to deploy security forces from their Djibouti base to conduct security operations in Africa and to construct another military base in West Africa have caused much agitation in the US administration.

For China, the HoA is first and foremost crucial for advancing its strategic positioning towards Africa by pushing forward BRI projects in the region. Among its regional partners, Ethiopia represents a central hub for China's strategic presence. Specifically, China has invested heavily in industrial parks, manufacturing and real estate sectors, and built and partly financed the Ethiopia-Djibouti railway. Chinese companies were also involved in the construction of Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance Dam (GERD). By 2020, the accumulated FDI flows from China to Ethiopia amounted to 2.27bn USD (2003: 0.98m USD; 2020: 310.8m USD). In March 2021, China and Ethiopia signed an MoU on security safeguarding mechanisms for major BRI projects in the country. Corresponding measures include the provision of security equipment for the Ethiopian Police Commission to protect operations of the Ethiopia-Djibouti railway. Politically, relations are also close: China is among the most vocal supporters of Ethiopian President Abiy Ahmed, backing his government's rejection of external interference in its internal affairs.



While much less significant in terms of economic cooperation and trade, China is forming strategic diplomatic and security partnerships with other countries in the HoA as well. In Eritrea, for example, China provides financial assistance and offers to share governance lessons, while supporting the government's rejection of Western sanctions. Meanwhile, to Somalia, China recently donated military equipment in support of anti-terrorism operations, particularly against Al-Shabaab. Overall, the HoA has experienced a steady increase in Chinese investments and relationship-building efforts, as well as, with the opening of China's first overseas military base in Djibouti, "a historic departure in China's foreign policy as well as Africa relations."⁵ However, the region is also severely affected by political instability and security challenges, including territorial disputes between states, violent extremism, and armed conflict, all of which can also affect Chinese investments and citizens. For instance, Chinese-operated construction sites in Lamu County – a major venue of the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia (LAPSSET) regional transport corridor project in Kenya, which is part of the BRI – have repeatedly come under attack by militant groups connected to Al-Shabaab. In Ethiopia, fighting in the Tigray Region has forced China to evacuate its nationals, mainly construction workers. Similar to other regions in the world, Chinese nationals have increasingly become victims of attacks and kidnappings – a trend amplified by the emergence of BRI projects.⁶ Overall, China's substantial economic outreach in Ethiopia and the wider HoA has drawn the country progressively into the region's conflicts and broader regional security issues. Therefore, China's peace and security initiative should be seen in this light.



⁵ Large, *China and Africa*, 170.

⁶ Hendrix, Cullen S. 2022. "Chinese nationals have become targets for violence as China deepens its international reach". Peterson Institute for International Economics, 15 June 2022.

China's 'Initiative of Peaceful Development in the Horn of Africa'

During a press conference in January 2022 in Mombasa, State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi announced the 'Initiative of Peaceful Development in the Horn of Africa.' Shortly after, he appointed Ambassador Xue Bing as the first Chinese special envoy to the region. With these steps, China has signalled its intention to assume a more prominent role in securing its investments and fostering development in the HoA. In June 2022, China hosted a two-day peace conference in Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa, which was attended by foreign ministers and senior officials from Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda. While no specific regional conflicts were discussed, Xue Bing declared his willingness to act as a mediator in the region, if requested by the conflict parties. This, however, is standard procedure for Chinese political cadres who tend to express at least a symbolic willingness to mediate without making clear commitments.

Official reports by Chinese state-sponsored media outlets aside, initial international and regional commentaries on the conference were mostly sceptical, leaving observers wondering what to expect from the initiative and China's special envoy in terms of substance. The Economist was doubtful about China's willingness to "go beyond vague statements of principle ('win-win solutions') or ideas that are already broadly accepted by the parties involved." Chinese diplomacy was described in the same article as unlikely to propose solutions to conflicts in the region. Elsewhere, the China-Global South Project wondered "if they really know what they are getting themselves into." While many political leaders in the region in principle expressed appreciation, the absence of Eritrea and the circumvention of contested issues like the GERD have been seen as limiting China's potential to make meaningful contributions to the resolution of the region's various conflicts. Moreover, critical observers pointed out that, through its arms sales and loyalty to incumbent regimes, "China is part of the problem." Further commentaries have read the initiative as a mostly strategic move in the context of the geopolitical competition playing out in the HoA. Xue Bing has



Addis Ababa, March 6, 2021:
China and Ethiopia signed an MoU on establishing security safeguarding mechanisms for major projects under the BRI.
Photo: © picture alliance / Xinhua News Agency | Michael Tewelde

repeatedly declared foreign intervention as the root cause of conflicts in the HoA – widely understood as an implicit criticism of the U.S. On a similar note, Wang Yi stated that “[i]t is up to our [African] friends to see which system is good and which systems, Western or Chinese, you could learn from.” Other observers interpreted the conference in Addis Ababa as a first attempt to initiate a smaller, regionally-focused Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) with a different label (security) but similar optics and talking points.

However, many observers agree that the initiative in principle shows China's keen interest in contributing to stabilising the HoA. It is also seen as a demonstration of its convening power to bring together states that are often hostile to one another. Therefore, the initiative should not be dismissed prematurely as exclusively symbolic and without consequences. Instead, China's announcement to support “lasting stability, peace, and prosperity” in the region as well as to assist “regional countries in addressing the triple challenges of security, development and governance” should be regarded in light of China's domestic experience and its changing discourse on dealing with traditional and non-traditional security threats, which has been slowly adapted to Chinese foreign policy.

China's 'Initiative of Peaceful Development in the Horn of Africa'

The initiative (also referred to as an 'outlook') has been postulated by Wang Yi, Xue Bing, and Chinese ambassadors in the wider HoA region. While no specific action plan has been published so far, Chinese officials have propagated the following framework:

- **A security pillar**, which focuses on the implementation of the Addis Ababa peace conference. China offered this platform “for everybody to come together to settle their differences without external intervention and to settle their differences through peaceful negotiations.”⁷
- **A development pillar**, in which the sustainable operation of two China-supported BRI railway projects (Mombasa to Nairobi in Kenya, and Yaji Railway connecting Ethiopia and Djibouti) and the development of coastal areas around the Red Sea and in the East African region are highlighted as key components.
- **A governance pillar**, in which China offers to share its development experience. In contra to 'Western' countries, which would “preach their style,” Xue Bing suggests that his role is to “support regional countries to independently handle regional affairs” and to “encourage regional countries to develop a path which is suitable for their national conditions.”⁸

⁷ Mutambo, Aggrey. 2022. “Xue Bing: Beijing will send engineers, not weapons, to Horn of Africa”. The East African, 21 March 2022.

⁸ 地区国家认为，中方构想支持地区国家探索符合自身国情的发展道路，是中方为地区和平、安全、发展作出的新的重要贡献，符合地区国家和人民的根本利益。Interview with Xue Bing in China Daily (Chinese), 18 April 2022, translation by the author.

The changing security-development nexus in China's foreign policy

China's deepening security engagement in the HoA needs to be seen against the background of an overall change in China's approach to development, security, and stability under Xi's leadership. In the last decade, Chinese domestic policy has shifted from emphasising development over security to an approach that puts security and development on an equal footing. Already, in one of his first official speeches, Xi emphasised the idea of a "comprehensive concept of national security" (总体国家安全观), which comprises internal and external as well as traditional and non-traditional security problems. In the last decade, security has become a key topic in shaping Chinese politics, which also underlines the growing convergence (regarding narrative and instruments) of domestic and foreign policy under Xi. These changes have also had an impact on China's relations with Africa – and in particular the HoA. Three specific perspectives need to be stressed here: first, the role of development and infrastructure; second, the successful Chinese narration of building a Chinese-African 'community of destiny'; and third, the growing prominence of security in China's foreign and global policy discourse.

'Development first' and infrastructure in foreign policy

At the beginning of Xi's leadership (starting in 2012/2013), Chinese domestic policy mainly followed the long-term 'development first' approach.⁹ In other words, economic needs were to be addressed first, before social and political stability could be guaranteed. This approach emphasised economic development as a prerequisite for security. Basically, every policy decision had to be subordinated to the goal of reaching a certain degree of economic development first. Even though this was primarily a domestic guideline, it, for a long time, also impacted Chinese foreign activities, contributing to the strong emphasis on economic cooperation. With the BRI, Xi's ambition to connect the world with China through – among other things – major infrastructure projects, on the one hand, clearly builds on the country's domestic development experiences. On the other hand, the BRI also grew into a synonym for China's growing global influence. As highlighted elsewhere, "China has transformed connectivity into a synonym for people's material empowerment (...), equal prosperity as well as global inclusiveness."¹⁰ This understanding is also reflected in the HoA initiative, which identifies building infrastructure through the BRI as key to economic development and regional stability, further manifesting China's growing influence in the region. It is hence not surprising that Xi termed the BRI a "road for peace" in 2017. Building infrastructure and connectivity have been identified as having value as such without actually demanding that recipient states change their political systems and way of governance.

⁹ Wang, Howard. 2022. "Security Is a Prerequisite for Development": Consensus-Building Toward a New Top Priority in the Chinese Communist Party." *Journal of Contemporary China*.

¹⁰ Godehardt, Nadine and Karoline Postel-Vinay. 2020. "Connectivity and Geopolitics: Beware the "New Wine in Old Bottles" Approach". SWP Comment, 6.

This is a crucial difference to peacebuilding approaches as practiced by many other external actors in the HoA, especially when it comes to objectives and sequencing: (liberal) peacebuilding work traditionally promotes development in the context of democratic institution building. In contrast, China puts a premium on political stability and strong governments that are able to execute economic projects. However, this approach should not be mistaken for a general preference for cooperating with authoritarian regimes – a suspicion often raised in the context of geopolitical rivalry. This distinction is important to keep in mind when it comes to (in-)compatibilities with other peacebuilding approaches, as discussed later.

Building a Chinese-style international community: 'Communities of destiny'

'China's rise' with its successful development approach is appreciated by governments and citizens in many African countries, reflected in the largely positive views expressed on China's political and economic influence on the continent. China is widely seen as making tangible contributions to the improvement of people's living conditions. In this political climate, China's leadership has been partly successful in influencing African government discourses by introducing a number of Chinese policy formulations that are increasingly used by African rulers and in FOCAC documents.¹¹ Prominently, these include the narrative of 'communities of destiny' (命运共同体) to describe the special relationship between China and Africa, which is frequently mentioned during FOCAC meetings. Chinese officials attempt to re-shape the meaning of terms such as 'international community' by referring to it in relation to Chinese-led mechanisms or by equating it with the Chinese goal of forming a 'global community of destiny.' This rather bulky Chinese policy formulation – at least to European ears – is quite central to Xi's foreign policy logbook; Xi used the term earlier at the UN General Assembly in 2015. Since then, he has continuously sought to transform it into a new, or rather Chinese, understanding of the international community.¹² In addition, Chinese diplomats in Africa reportedly promote Xi's book *The Governance of China* as an example that African countries may follow. In the HoA initiative, China expresses its willingness to "share the Chinese wisdom" on economic development with government counterparts in the region. Crucially, 'Chinese wisdom' (中国智慧) is another common policy formulation under Xi, demonstrating the growing desire to share the experiences and achievements of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) with others.¹³ In countries like Ethiopia, where China has established close political connections, decision-makers are thus ready to listen carefully to proposals from China, while they are often more sceptical about solutions proposed by other external partners like the U.S. While this readiness to listen and engage by no means ensures the initiative's success, it is an important starting point and perhaps one of the reasons why China has chosen the HoA to test the adoption of a more engaged foreign policy approach, despite the high density of active 'Western' actors in the region.

¹¹ Kohlenberg, Paul J. and Nadine Godehardt. 2021. "Locating the 'South' in China's Connectivity Politics," *Third World Quarterly* 42: 9.

¹² We refer to the term in the literal translation, as originally used by Chinese officials. Subsequent Chinese translations, at first mostly for European or U.S. audiences, used the term 'community with a shared future for mankind', leaving aside the emphasis on 'destiny'.

¹³ Christine Hackenesch and Julia Bader. 2020. "The Struggle for Minds and Influence: The Chinese Communist Party's Global Outreach," *International Studies Quarterly* 64:3.

Chinese thinking on security: The Global Security Initiative

As a recent study pointed out, the emphasis on an integrated approach to security and development, whereby both are afforded equal importance, has become part of the official party line after the Fifth Plenum of the CCP Central Committee and a follow-up Politburo group study session in 2020.¹⁴ To some extent, this rhetoric adjustment was long overdue since the idea of a comprehensive national security approach (in other words, the merging of national and global security) has dominated Xi's thinking from the beginning of his tenure, and has also been manifested in a series of national security laws.¹⁵ These adjustments also laid the ground for security to play a more prominent role in China's foreign policy. Recently, this became visible in Xi's announcement of the Global Security Initiative (GSI). Reflecting the domestic discourse, the GSI enshrines the equal significance of security and development, stating that "development is the foundation of security" and "security is the prerequisite of development." Consequently, development and security are equally important when it comes to building a global 'community of destiny,' thus accentuating how the thinking on development, governance, and security is closely intertwined.

China's 'Global Security Initiative'

The GSI was announced by Xi during the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2022 in China – which is an Asian version of the World Economic Forum. The GSI is a broad framework that postulates a set of Chinese policy principles and concepts, like 'indivisible security,' to cope with international security challenges, without providing concrete steps and details. The initiative is a response to two important developments. First, it transcends the internal debates on a comprehensive national security approach to world politics. Second, it also marks the first, rather broad, Chinese reflection on the changing global security environment since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, the GSI was not written hastily. Rather, it seems to have been in the making for some time and should also be read in connection with China's Global Development Initiative (GDI) which was announced by Xi at the General Debate of the 76th Session of the UN General Assembly in September 2021.

For many reasons, including the changing global environment and the growing rivalry with the U.S., the Chinese leadership seems to have concluded that building infrastructure and connectivity is not enough anymore. This shift in narrative could encourage Chinese leaders to take not only some risk in defending their core security interests abroad – which they have been doing increasingly, including recently for instance in the case of Taiwan – but also to accept the risks of economic setbacks at home while actively promoting security and stability in regions outside of China's immediate neighbourhood, including the HoA. In a recent guest blog in Kenya's Sunday Nation, the Chinese ambassador Zhou Pingjian

¹⁴ Wang, Howard. 2022. "Security Is a Prerequisite for Development": Consensus-Building Toward a New Top Priority in the Chinese Communist Party". In *Journal of Contemporary China*.

¹⁵ This development started in 2015 with the announcement of the National Security Law, followed by sector-specific laws, for instance on Cybersecurity (2016), the Security Law regarding Hong Kong (2021), and recently further expanding into Xi's Global Security Initiative (2022).

discussed the HoA initiative in direct connection with the GSI. According to Zhou, both initiatives are aimed at “building a security community as the long-term goal, in order to foster a new type of security.”¹⁶

China's approach to containing conflicts abroad

One of the main questions regarding the HoA initiative's substance and possible consequences for peace and security in the region is how Chinese actors are going to translate these abstract policy formulations into practice, aside from continuing to invest in BRI projects and taking steps to ensure the physical safety of its construction sites and citizens. According to the initiative's security pillar, facilitating negotiations between regional stakeholders is at the heart of the security-development nexus. Therefore, a closer look at the country's experience in international peace mediation can provide cues for what to expect. Beside its substantial engagement in UN peacekeeping, China has up until today rarely appeared as a frontline peace broker in conflict regions – which probably explains regional commentators' cautious stance on China's HoA mediation announcement. In fact, in view of its long-standing non-interference principle in foreign relations, any involvement in the domestic affairs of sovereign states in the HoA will likely be interpreted as the first signs of a gradual departure from this principle – by international and regional observers and from within China.

When involved as a third party in negotiations between conflicting parties, China has so far by and large applied a narrow facilitative approach aimed at containing conflicts and reducing tensions, by encouraging talks, while having limited involvement in the actual content of the negotiations. Chinese officials insist that the country only enters the scene as a third party on request and with the consent of all conflicting parties. External incentives or sanctions are rejected on principle, as they may limit the conflict parties' scope to make autonomous choices. However, in view of China's economic power in many conflict regions, a study on China's Afghanistan engagement suggested that prospects of Chinese involvement can encourage conflict parties to come to the negotiation table, without China explicitly offering incentives as leverage in mediation processes. This could also happen in the HoA. Moreover, while China postulates that its principles of engaging as a third party are distinctly non-intrusive (limited to process facilitation, with conflict parties formulating agreements on their own terms), these principles are not so different from adaptive mediation approaches which are mainstreamed in peacebuilding work as well. And, finally, China has gained its mediation experience largely through involvement in multilateral peacekeeping, where it has participated in formulative mediation. In contrast to facilitative mediation, mediators practicing a formulative approach assume a more active role in the negotiations, for example during the process of drafting roadmaps for settling conflicts and peacebuilding. Thus, when it comes to the mediation techniques that China is likely to apply in the HoA, those do not differ by design from those applied by other peacebuilding actors, despite claims to the contrary. The devil rather lies in the not-so-minor detail of how China defines its role in the established regional peace architecture – and vice versa.

¹⁶ Zhou, Pingjian. 2022. “Global Security Initiative: A sure path to lasting peace, tranquillity”. *Nation*, 22 May 2022.

Peace and security in the Horn of Africa – what role for China?

With its HoA initiative, China enters a crowded and volatile region, with various domestic and external actors with stakes in peace and security in situ already. Therefore, much will depend on how the U.S., the EU, and China react to one another in a political environment that is increasingly characterised by global power projection and securitised economic relations. Under these conditions, the risks are many, and only a few opportunities exist for contributing to peace and security in the HoA in actual collaboration.

Firstly, global power rivalries between ‘the West’ and China impact the political climate in the HoA negatively. In light of the changing global realities and especially with the Russian invasion in Ukraine, the EU and its member states are currently reviewing their relations with China. This is particularly the case for the German government which is finalising its first ‘National China Strategy,’ and increasingly seeing China through the lenses of systemic rivalry. This perspective ultimately limits the realm for cooperation and coordination. NATO also recently declared China a source of systemic challenges. As mutual threat perceptions between ‘the West’ and China intensify, interdependencies and vulnerabilities that could derive from closer engagements appear undesirable for both sides. Hence, neither side is likely to approach the other with offers of cooperation. This also affects the EU, as the U.S. remains a traditional cooperation partner and strategic ally. Under these conditions, the danger of fragmentation is real, as “[p]arallel processes may be run in tandem, in competition, or in complete ignorance of each other.”¹⁷ It is likely that actors will increasingly find themselves in a contending situation, defending their positions against one another and neglecting the bigger picture of peace and security. Competing approaches to settling regional conflicts are likely to exacerbate conflicts rather than contribute to solving them.

What is more, the diplomatic rapport between Western diplomats and Chinese officials in the region is extremely limited. The COVID-19 pandemic has further hampered even sporadic encounters between official Western and Chinese representatives. Similar coordination obstacles have been observed in other peacebuilding contexts. However, on the contrary, Chinese officials have well-established lines of communication with host governments in the HoA. Therefore, it is likely that important threads of conversation will unfold through parallel channels, with Western actors facing the risk of being gradually cut out of important discussions.¹⁸ In turn, the diplomatic silence between Western and Chinese officials is also likely to limit the effectiveness of China’s special envoy and its peace initiative – if both are supposed to be more than a rhetorical and symbolic exercise.

Last but not least, tensions in part also arise from different understandings of how to manage and settle conflicts. Several Western practitioners have criticised China’s generic approach to developmental peace: China puts development and infrastructure investment first, and provides fully-fledged packages including funding, workforce, and maintenance often through Chinese state-owned enterprises, without conducting conflict impact assessments or similar analytical exercises, thus paying limited attention to the complexities and entanglements of specific conflict settings (the HoA being a prime example). According to its critics, China’s objective is not conflict transformation but rather to facilitate cooperation with and between actors who can guarantee a stable business environment.¹⁹ Moreover, China stands accused of working with incumbent governments

¹⁷ Peter, Mateja and Haley Rice. 2022. “Non-Western approaches to peacemaking and peacebuilding”. In Global Transitions Series. PeaceRep 27 May 2022, 27.

¹⁸ Interview with expert on China-Africa relations, remote, 3 September 2022.

¹⁹ Interview with peace and conflict practitioner, remote, 2 July 2022.

and state authorities more or less exclusively, regardless of the level of state involvement in human rights violations.²⁰ By way of contrast, Chinese cadres contend that 'the West' aims to transform all countries into liberal democracies as a solution to any type of conflict, while putting its own security agenda at the centre of the security-development nexus.²¹ Values like transparency and human rights on the one hand, and respect for sovereignty and non-interference on the other, are thus increasingly invoked by both sides as distinguishing features. These different perspectives on the root causes of conflict (a lack of development opportunities versus a lack of good governance) and suitable actions taken by external actors have resulted in situations where Western diplomats and peacebuilding practitioners see China's approach as largely incompatible with their own priorities and objectives. The HoA initiative is not likely to alter significantly the differences in priorities and sequencing, especially since China and 'the West' aim to distinguish themselves rhetorically and contest each other's theories of change. It follows that, while the approaches are not incompatible by default, cooperative formats are unlikely to materialise. This is particularly the case in domestic conflicts where state security forces are accused of committing human rights abuses (i.e. the Tigray Region) or where the One-China policy is not supported by all conflict parties (i.e. Somalia and Somaliland).

Yet, advantages could be gained from identifying potential spaces of common interest, as China might possess means of influencing peace and conflict dynamics in the HoA that other actors do not. Collaborative formats could, for example, be explored in inter-state conflict settings where China has access to otherwise hard-to-reach conflict parties (i.e. Eritrea), and where China could provide mutual incentives for actors to come to the negotiation table and bring developmental opportunities to remote areas.²² In fact, Xue Bing kicked off his first and second regional tours in Eritrea, meeting President Isaias Afwerki and high-ranking officials, underlining the close ties between the two countries. What is more, exploring synergies between development-focused approaches and governance-focused approaches could pave the way for some type of collaborative coexistence. Precedence exists in the field of security and peace: China and the U.S. coordinated mediation efforts between conflict parties in South Sudan in the past, where de-escalation was a common interest. Off the Somali coast, China also participated in international naval anti-piracy operations. Certain cues for China's interest in rapprochement exist today as well: in a call with UN Special Envoy Hanna Serwaa Tetteh in August 2022, Xue Bing reportedly signalled that China is ready to align the implementation of its HoA peace initiative with the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (which is also the case for China's Global Development Initiative). Along similar lines, China's Ambassador Zhang Jun at the UN Security Council underlined China's interest in cooperating with international partners in fostering peace and development in Africa. By exploring the robustness of these statements, at the very least resource-intensive turf wars could be avoided.

Furthermore, the EU and its member states should dig deeper into questions of how decision-makers and observers from the region evaluate Chinese engagement in the HoA and where they identify areas of potential collaboration. China's willingness to tackle security challenges, though seen as driven mainly by its national interests, is recognised by many regional actors as long-term-oriented and genuine.²³ Senegalese Foreign Minister Aïssata Tall Sall's call during the 2021 FOCAC meeting in Dakar for more Chinese security

²⁰ Interview with peacekeeping expert, remote, 5 July 2022.


²¹ Wong, Kwok C. 2021. "The Rise of China's Developmental Peace: Can an Economic Approach to Peacebuilding Create Sustainable Peace?" In *Global Society* 35:4.

²² Mariani, Bernardo. 2022. "China's Engagement in Conflict and Post-Conflict Settings: The Quest for Stability". In *Global Transitions Series*. PeaceRep, 9 May 2022, 8.

²³ Interview with Ethiopian scholar, remote, 22 June 2022.

engagement in sub-Saharan Africa is just one example of how China's investments have raised expectations regarding its contributions to security and stability on the continent. Finally, European actors and China alike have committed to working with and through regional peace and security architectures (i.e. the IGAD and the AU), providing another angle for (indirect) cooperation. It is likely that these regional stakeholders will request third parties to coordinate their interventions in support of peace and security at some point. As the EU and Germany aim to renew and bolster their partnerships with African countries, regional development agendas should take centre stage. Crucially, regional priorities should not take a backseat to strategic considerations arising from systematic rivalry between China and the U.S. that loom increasingly large over the HoA.

Megatrends Afrika is a joint project of SWP, IDOS and IfW.
The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s).
All project publications are subject to an internal peer review process.

 This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

SWP Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik | German Institute for International and Security Affairs

IDOS German Institute for Development and Sustainability

IfW Kiel Institute for the World Economy

www.megatrends-afrika.de

megatrends-afrika@swp-berlin.org

ISSN 2747-4275

DOI 10.18449/2022MTA-WP01

 **SWP**
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for
International and Security Affairs

 **IDOS** | German Institute
of Development
and Sustainability

 **ifw** KIEL INSTITUTE FOR
THE WORLD ECONOMY

Funded by:

 Federal Foreign Office

 Federal Ministry
of Defence

 Federal Ministry
for Economic Cooperation
and Development