

China's Peace Agency Beyond UN Peacekeeping Contexts - Developmental Peace and the Shift from 'Good' to 'Effective' Governance

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Introduction

A distinct logic underlying China's 'developmental peace,' compared to Western 'liberal peace,' was popularized in English-language research circles by He Yin, an Associate Professor at the China Peacekeeping Police Training Center, at the People's Police University of China. Writing in the context of increasing Chinese participation in UN Peacekeeping Missions (UNPKOs), a turn toward developmental peace was seen as marking a significant theoretical departure from a liberal emphasis on democratization, rule of law, and human rights as precursors to peace. Instead of institutional reform, He Yin (2021) posited a state-led focus on infrastructure-centric growth and poverty alleviation as the hallmark of a pragmatic approach to peace. Such an approach was deemed more compatible with China's stance of non-interference in the domestic affairs of host states.

In light of this, this article highlights the emergence of developmental peace as an 'economic growth' first approach to stability, premised on China's domestic experience of state-led development. This approach is subject to conceptual expansion beyond its origins in UNPKOs, being taken up by scholars to problematize the nature and function of Chinese investment along the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Consequently, this article identifies the need for broader theoretic engagement with 'effective governance' as a tier within developmental peace, as Chinese investment encounters the sociopolitical dynamics characterizing conflict-affected states (CAS) in partner BRI states.

China's Expanding 'Peace Agency' Abroad

It follows that China's experiences under UNPKOs and UN Peacebuilding Operations (UNPBOs) have proved a rich resource for generating a new norm with theoretical potential, allowing both Chinese and foreign scholars to revisit mainstream debates on the security-development nexus and its impact on institutional practice in multilateral settings such as the UN. Benabdallah cites this as a dialectical interchange, a process

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in which China both upholds the existing international order, stressing state sovereignty and non-interference as its foundational principles, and promotes alternative norms and practices, premised on its own domestic and regional experiences (2019, p. 92). This 'development' first approach has expanded to encompass the logic and function of Chinese investments in CAS along the BRI, drawing attention to the interplay between economic growth and sociopolitical discord in multiethnic, postcolonial states. China, as a 'new actor in CAS', is gradually expanding its "limited policy frameworks on how to engage, often learning as it goes" (Adhikari, 2024, p. 972).

Zhang highlights a 'principle of equity' characterizing Chinese diplomatic practice, where there is 'no differentiation between so-called conflict-affected or peaceful countries in the Chinese lexicon' (2020, chap. 10). Abb (2018) in turn, cites the pitfalls of the ensuing narrow, economically determinist thinking, which tends to sideline local political processes in favor of a statist, order-oriented focus. It follows that the uneven distribution of costs and benefits associated with concrete development projects necessitates some form of management, while the absence of conflict sensitivity in development planning risks conflict relapse. As Deng Xiaoping's reference to 'letting some people get rich first' highlights, the initial inequality accompanying economic growth is often explained as a consequence of states strategically prioritizing productivity to accelerate innovation, with the eventual goal of facilitating common prosperity.

Gao Bai (2023) states that the implementation of Chinese FDI must be analyzed in light of the capacity and performance of the domestic political-economic systems of partner states, in addition to the social consequences of this investment, i.e., the distribution of benefits among local communities. Thus, the sustainability of 'win-win cooperation' as a non-zero-sum communitarian approach to development hinges on local ownership and 'buy-in' of its methods and logic. As highlighted by Gao, the root of the anti-globalization pushback by social groups in developed countries is the failure to distribute globalization's benefits fairly and equitably. For China to realize its intended objectives along the BRI amidst this anti-globalization trend, both development and distribution must form a part of its long-term focus.

Consequently, the precise operationalization of developmental peace in conflict-affected settings remains undertheorized, necessitating rigorous conceptual engagement with the three tiers of developmental peace highlighted by Rosemary Foot (2020), He Yin (2021), and Meng Wenting (2023): economic growth, effective governance, and human survival. Abb highlights the 'almost-accidental' evolution of a Chinese peacebuilding model, stressing the need for 'greater coordination' for the generation of a 'genuinely new approach' (2018, p. 1). It follows that research has so far been dominated by a focus on 'economic growth,' with scant attention paid to the logic of 'effective governance' in states with low levels of socioeconomic welfare.

One Pathway to Development?

Drezner (2025) likens the West's approach to development thinking to the pursuit of a singular recipe or grand idea, a tendency that led to 'Big Push' public and private goods investment in the 1960s, and the neoliberal Washington Consensus following the Cold War. During the same period, scholars such as Hirschman argued that there was no one set path for underdeveloped nations to follow, nor any *a priori* sequence of steps for them to pursue, but rather that development constituted an iterative process featuring backward and forward linkages and bottlenecks that generated sufficient impetus for additional policy reforms. In his seminal 1958 treatise titled 'The Strategy of Economic

Development,' Hirschman argues that the state serves as an active agent necessary for creating the disequilibria that catalyze development. The state's role in decision-making couples pragmatism and possibilism in managing regional inequality, which is essential to the initial stages of development and is driven by favorable conditions, resources, or location.

In promoting this view, Hirschman contradicted the received wisdom that dominated post-war development theory in the 1950s, which held that 'balanced growth,' i.e., simultaneous, widespread investment across multiple sectors and regions, was essential. In contrast, Hirschman proposed polarization and disequilibria in the initial stages, sustained by a 'tunnel effect,' i.e., public tolerance of inequality for a period as changes in the core or growth poles generated hope and inspired confidence in the state. Yeung's (2017) review of Hirschman's work highlights the role of deliberate economic policy in correcting imbalances, asserting the state's role as the risk-bearing 'operator', fielding investment choices based on limited know-how.

China's development strategy under Deng Xiaoping echoes this reasoning, with Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in coastal cities such as Shenzhen, Xiamen, and Shanghai chosen to concentrate FDI in a few select growth poles. The high rate of return from this decision triggered polarization and regional inequality throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, as the economic gap between eastern and western Chinese provinces widened significantly. Nonetheless, as living standards rose sharply across the country, the Hirschmanian tunnel effect saw the population maintain optimism and high expectations, taking the success of the coastal regions to signal the possibility of a similar trajectory for their own region. The 'Go West Development Program' and initiatives targeting poverty alleviation illustrate the state's role in correcting imbalances by using the dynamic tension between growth poles and the rest of the country to propel broader national development. Thus, as emphasized by Drezner, Hirschmanian analysis outlines the state's functional capacity to induce growth through pragmatism and improvisation.

This resonates strongly with what Ang (2016, 2020), in her work examining the role of complex adaptive systems in China's growth, identifies as 'co-evolutionary' development, challenging conventional linear theories that hold that good institutions must precede growth. Hirschman shares a similar strategic focus, advocating localism and eclecticism against big-push grand designs or best practices. Key aspects of Ang's theory include central state direction paired with local adaptation (directed improvisation) and the harnessing of existing institutions to build new markets, in which initial 'messy' conditions generate demand for stronger, more structured alternatives. This echoes Hirschman's unbalanced growth strategy, with both theorists emphasizing the state's role in advancing development as a pragmatic, adaptive process, in contrast to Western idealized models. The emphasis on the state contradicts the Washington Consensus's minimization of state intervention and its emphasis on top-down, prescriptive 'one-size-fits-all' philosophy rather than pragmatic experimentation.

Moyn (2023) identifies the distrust of the state underlying this philosophy as issuing from what he characterizes as 'Cold War liberalism,' i.e., the writings of influential intellectuals such as Isaiah Berlin, Judith Shklar, and Karl Popper in reaction to the rise of totalitarianism. He argues that earlier forms of liberalism in the 19th and early 20th century approached a strong and ambitious state as a vehicle for emancipatory change, with the potential to mobilize collective action. However, following WWII, an excessively libertarian interpretation of the state's role came to predominate in Western

intellectual circles, with mounting skepticism toward grand political projects and state authority.

‘Good’ Governance and Development Aid

Whereas initially, the transformational impact of development in stabilizing societies was assumed as a natural outcome of economic growth, the mid-1990s saw a shift in priority where “effecting social transformation (emerged as) a direct and explicit policy aim” (Duffield, 2014, p. 39). This is illustrated by the 1998 Prebisch Lecture delivered by Joseph Stiglitz to UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Geneva, where he critiqued the Washington Consensus as propounding too narrow a focus on structural adjustment and market reform, and advocated for a new developmental paradigm aimed at the transformation of whole societies (Duffield, 2014, p. 40).

In sum, the relationship between conflict and underdevelopment, and thus development and security, was seen through the modalities of an oppressive system where social exclusion, lack of protection from economic shocks, human rights abuses, and corruption, etc., countenanced rebellion in marginalized elements, mobilized through such vehicles as ethnic identity. The liberal contention was that violent conflict, while condemnable, afforded the opportunity to supplant traditional modes of authority in pre-modern state systems subject to such maladaptive structural modalities (Duffield, 2014, p. 122). Hout and Molenaers (2022) examine the role of global development cooperation policies in redefining the relationship between the state and the market, with a gradual shift toward neoliberalism and marketization in the policy prescriptions of International Financial Institutions (IFIs). The authors discuss the World Bank’s 1998 publication titled “Assessing Aid: What Works, What Doesn’t, and Why,” as examining aid effectiveness as determined by the quality of governance in recipient states, taking a sound macroeconomic policy environment and transparent, as well as accountable, institutions, as two key barometers of ‘quality’ (Hout and Molenaers, 2022, p. 326).

The report called on donor states to revisit the governance of development assistance, shifting away from a micro-level, project-oriented focus toward a macro-level, policy- and institution-oriented outlook. A key element of this shift was ‘good governance’ emerging as both “the *condition* for as well as the *objective* of development cooperation,” requiring national governments to engage civil society both in identifying the nature of local poverty conditions through technocratic expertise and in devising inclusive and accountable decision-making processes. Hout and Molenaers cite how the events of September 11, 2001, cemented the belief of governance as the key issue to be addressed as part of the development agenda, emphasizing the link between terrorism and poverty in states with weak institutions. The 2006 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the 2008 Accra Agenda for Agenda appeared to illustrate this mainstreaming of governance reform, through the modality of ‘general budget support’ (GBS). Featuring dialogues on donor coordination and donor-recipient policy discussion, the rampant emphasis on good governance resulted in core tensions, chiefly arising from a ‘lack of consensus regarding the specificities and normative components’ of what constituted governance itself (Hout and Molenaers, 2022, p. 330).

A Shift to ‘Effective’ Governance – and the Need for Greater Theoretical Engagement

Wang (2023) traces the emergence of an overall security concept within China that expanded Jiang’s ‘development-first’ strategy to encompass a broader range of internal

and external security issues across multiple domains. Citing a series of three speeches by President Xi Jinping in 2014, Wang analyzes the debate generated by a shift toward an integrated development-security approach within the Party, culminating in the 2020 Fifth Plenum communique cementing Party consensus. Wang highlights this consensus as indicative of the intention of the Chinese leadership for ‘China’s economic activities and security activities to be mutually reinforcing’ with policy initiatives in areas such as culture and economics deployed as vehicles to advance security objectives (Wang, 2023, p. 539).

Building on this gradual expansion of China’s security concept, Ghiselli (2021) examines how the presence of Chinese nationals and assets abroad emerges as a security issue in China’s foreign policy debate across the Jiang, Hu, and Xi eras. It follows that the expansion of China’s economic presence in BRI countries extends its ‘interest frontiers’ beyond its geographical borders, prompting China to draw on its own domestic experiences to posit a peace and development strategy for CAS partners. Foot (2020) highlights the role of a strong state underlying such strategization, with economic growth and development often treated as interchangeable concepts.

Consequently, while good governance under liberal peace marked an attempt to shape the contextual conditions impacting economic growth so as to render development sustainable, the developmental peace logic argues that these conditions will ‘co-evolve’ with growth itself, citing liberal institutional reform as interference in a state’s sovereign domain. Abb and Yuan (2025) trace this logic China’s experience with local governance following Deng Xiaoping, marking a transition from revolution to stability-seeking characterized by a status-quo-oriented prioritization of domestic living standards. The transition retained a Marxist-Leninist emphasis on economic determinism and a materialist understanding of conflict, with material well-being as the key condition for peace. This contemporary growth-first emphasis marks a stark contrast with traditional Chinese philosophy’s theorization of peace, the latter being more akin to Galtungian ‘positive’ peace.

It follows that, rather than limiting itself to materialist understandings, traditional Chinese philosophy more explicitly engages with the coexistence of difference within a given social order, and with the role of personal virtues and interpersonal obligations as the basis for harmonious coexistence. While philosophies such as Mohism and Confucianism do not systematically advance ideas for conflict prevention, “these can be extrapolated from the conditions for peace that they do name: ... the cultivation of individual morality and benevolent, people-oriented governance ... the creation of non-exploitative, egalitarian economic systems both domestically and internationally” (Abb and Yuan, 2025, p.17). Developmental peace discourse, in its emphasis on ‘effective’ governance may be said to partly resonate with Confucian thought, though the linkage has not overtly been explored in the given literature.

Abb and Yuan cite how developmental peace largely avoids “the risk that political elites might be(come) exploitative or predatory” (Abb and Yuan, 2025, p.20). As illustrated by the work of He Yin, Wang Xuejun, Zhang Chun, Meng Wenting, Zhao Lei, and Wei Ling, among others, there is, indeed, a tendency, deriving from treating domestic governance as a ‘sovereign’ matter, to assume that a capable government will inherently act in the collective interest (Ibid). It follows that the rejection of a ‘presumed linear causality between democratic governance and positive outcomes such as peace or prosperity,’ does not entail sidelining the role of governance altogether, rather, it asserts the necessity of understanding the formative influences shaping state governance in settings with a history and political culture different from China’s. In

sum, there is a need to engage with the interaction between ‘economic growth’ and ‘effective governance’ in the realization of development and security outcomes under developmental peace.

Conclusion

China’s rise as a great power is reflected in its emerging role as a ‘norm contributor’ in international development and security governance. Developmental peace, in shifting away from the governance reform logic of liberal internationalism, emphasizes economic growth, used interchangeably with development, as the ‘master key’ for peace and stability. As China’s peace agency expands beyond UNPKO and UNPBO contexts, this economics-first approach is encountering varied conflict dynamics rooted in distinct sociohistorical contexts in CAS along the BRI. It follows that the second tier of developmental peace, i.e., effective governance, must be revisited and examined alongside economic growth to understand how these states, in partnership with China, may navigate the logic of reform and economic growth as co-constitutive ‘adaptive’ processes.

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