

The Political Realities of Linking Security & Development

Unravelling China's Developmental Peace Approach to Mali's Ongoing Conflict:
A Contestation Against Liberal Peace?



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ABSTRACT

"The ocean owes its immensity to its capacity to accommodate rivers"

"Instead of giving fish, it is better to learn to fish"

These Chinese proverbs, shared by Zhu Liying, China's Ambassador to Mali during the closing ceremony of the 20th Bamako Forum², encapsulate the guiding philosophy behind China's growing involvement in African peace and security. The first proverb emphasizes the need for international cooperation in addressing global challenges, aligning with China's trend of embracing multilateralism as a major global power.³ The second proverb stresses the importance of self-sustainability, reflecting China's support for modernization in third countries, as seen in initiatives like the New Silk Road, prioritizing shared economic and developmental benefits over promoting democracy or human rights.⁴ This aligns with what Chi Fulin stated at the 2013 International Forum on China Reform in Hainan: "economic growth remains the key to solving all problems".⁵

The emergence of China's evolving role in Africa's peace and security landscape has sparked extensive discussions regarding its stance in relation to the prevailing peacebuilding framework, commonly referred to as liberal peace. In taking a critical look at the corresponding binary framework of 'challenger-versus-supporter' that emerges out of the two-sided debate, this research recognises a more nuanced analysis is necessary to elucidate the political nuances that sets apart China's approach from the conventional understanding of the security-development nexus.

Rather than viewing Western and Chinese approaches to peacebuilding as merely two polarized positions, the core focus of this research sheds light on China's challenge to and departure from the Western liberal-peace paradigm by creating its own approach that it calls 'developmental peace'. China's multi-faceted engagement in Mali as part of a complex regional conflict in the Sahel, presents a unique case study to explore the political realities that manifest in China's so-called 'development-as-security' approach. The theory of contestation serves as a valuable analytical framework to research this complication, as it offers insights into the nature of normative foundations underpinning international governance systems, particularly pertinent to the field of peacebuilding.

Considering the limited scholarly attention on examining these insights in the context of China's engagement in peacebuilding, this research operationalises the theory of contestation at the hand of Yuan's three-folded typology of contestation that targets different constituent parts of liberal peace norm construction to that help identify the real, not just assumed, intricate political realities at stake. The research can be placed in the broader theoretical framework of social constructivism, which asserts that the role of norms in global politics are not inherent in nature but shaped by ideational factors and subject to transformation through human action. Hence, this research proposes both relevant empirical and theoretical contributions.

As part of the research design, a combination of literature-based qualitative research methods (including critical document and discourse analysis) – purposefully sampling policy reports, government papers, official statements – has been employed to generate relevant data evidence.

² Liying (23 February 2020)

³ Council on Foreign Relations (2023)

⁴ Carozza (2021)

⁵ Xinhua (13 November 2013)

LIST OF ACRONYMS

AU	African Union
AQIM	Ansar Dine and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
CMLN	Comité Militaire de Libération Nationale (Military Committee of National Liberation)
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
FOCAC	Forum on China-Africa Cooperation
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
PAP	People's Liberation Army
PLA	People's Armed Police
PM	Prime Minister
POC	Protection of Civilians
PRC	People's Republic of China
PSC	Peace and Security Council
RIC	Responsibility of the International Community
R2P	Responsibility to Protect
SAR	Sovereignty as Responsibility
SOEs	State-owned Enterprises
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States
VP	Vice President

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Introduction

Initially, in the post-Cold War period, increased international cooperation and reduced geopolitical tensions led to the prominence of the Western liberal-peace paradigm. Emphasizing the significance of multilateralism in addressing global security challenges, this approach to conflict resolution presumed that adherence to the principles of democracy promotion, human rights protection, and market-oriented economic reforms would foster stability and development. Up until 2000s the implementation of these liberal principles has found a dominant way in United Nations (UN) missions and its politics, not only through engaging in preventive diplomacy but also comprehensive peacebuilding to create conditions conducive to long-term peace.⁶

This for example becomes evident when in 1992, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) contributed to establishing the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), a hybrid tribunal targeting those accountable for genocide and serious crimes during the Khmer Rouge regime. This initiative aimed to achieve justice while emphasizing reconciliation.⁷ Post-Bosnian War, the 1995 Dayton Agreement, facilitated by the UN, set a framework for Bosnia and Herzegovina's reconstruction and democratic development. UNMIBH in Bosnia conducted the first post-war elections in 1996, striving for a multi-ethnic and democratic government. The UN also played a role in privatizing state-owned enterprises, promoting economic efficiency, competition, and innovation.⁸ Similarly, in 1999, the UN mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) focused on reforming the country's security sector to align with democratic principles, restructuring armed forces and police, emphasizing civilian oversight, and promoting the rule of law.⁹

By the turn of the 21st century, the War on Terror narrative rhetoric was strategically employed to justify apprehensions regarding such foreign aid conditionalities under the liberal peace principles. Meanwhile, however, the rise of China as an assertive global player triggered concerns in the West. Particularly among conservative Americans who viewed China's economic ascendance, exemplified by large-scale infrastructure projects like through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)¹⁰, as a potential threat to maintain in control over Western norm construction.¹¹ In fact, China made a departure from the Western liberal-peace paradigm by introducing its own approach, termed 'developmental peace', to which Chinese scholar He Yin attaches two fundamental components.¹² The first revolves around economic development initiated by a robust central government.¹³ In contrast to the transformative goals of liberal peacebuilding, developmental peace seeks to maintain or fortify the existing government in the host country, allowing it to implement economic policies. This aligns with what Chi Fulin, head of the China Institute for Reform and Development, stated at the 2013 International Forum on China Reform in Hainan: "economic growth remains the key to solving all problems".¹⁴

The second pillar of developmental peace, as He Yin outlines, involves providing aid without attaching political conditions.¹⁵ This principle is also articulated within China's Eight Principles for Economic Aid and Technical Assistance to Other Countries, as outlined by Premier Zhou during his state visit to Mali in 1964.¹⁶ Mali, in breaking away from its colonial past, perceived China as a benevolent development partner, distinctly different from France and other Western counterparts, with no ambitions of hegemony or unsolicited meddling in its domestic matters.¹⁷ Besides, given Mali's landlocked, semi-desert, and economically challenged status, President Modibo Keita found merit in the comprehensive Chinese development assistance model that offered not only financial support but also dispatched skilled personnel to actively implement aid and infrastructure projects in various sectors, particularly agriculture, infrastructure, and rail construction.¹⁸ This sustained focus on 'win-win cooperation' while respecting sovereign equality became symbolic of China's dedication to fostering strong diplomatic and economic ties with Mali.¹⁹

However, in response to the 2012 crisis initiated by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad and the subsequent deteriorating situation in the Sahel region, China's involvement in Malian security intensified, exemplified by its supply of military aid and active engagement in the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Simultaneously, China reverted to its diplomatic positions, emphasizing

⁶ Paris (2010), p. 346

⁷ Richmond and Franks (2007)

⁸ Elezovic (2021)

⁹ Consiglio and Lecomte (2015)

¹⁰ See: <https://www.oboreurope.com/en/mali-officially-bri/>

¹¹ Silver et al. (April 12, 2023)

¹² He Yin (2014)

¹³ He Yin (2014)

¹⁴ Xinhua (13 November 2013)

¹⁵ He Yin (2014)

¹⁶ Zeng (2014)

¹⁷ Hodzi (2019), p.147

¹⁸ Hodzi (2019), pp. 145-6

¹⁹ Esterhuysen & Moctar (2012), p. 1

the link between state instability and economic underdevelopment. This is notably evidenced by the overrepresentation of non-military personnel in China's peacekeeping contingent, as demonstrated by their involvement in operating hospitals, constructing school fences, and drinking water projects.²⁰ Furthermore, the Malian conflict has been a site for diverse Chinese business engagements, ranging from small and medium-sized companies to larger State-owned Enterprises (SOEs).²¹ Fieldwork observations also reveal there has been an expansion of Chinese-led vocational training workshops – e.g., in Bamako, Ségou, and Kampala – which share significant potential for job creation, skills transfer, and enhancement of living conditions in Mali.²²

Together, these aspects – providing services and protection at the hand of development-oriented initiatives, rather than solely concentrating on the mere absence of conflict – encapsulates the guiding philosophy behind China's evolving engagement in Africa's peace and security landscape. Especially with the ascent of President Xi Jinping in 2013, there has been a notable increase accelerating in Chinese funding for peacebuilding activities on the continent, including support for the African Union (AU), greater participation in UN peacekeeping missions, and the provision of military training and weapons.²³ This shift to a more assertive foreign policy has sparked critical inquiries in policy and academic circles outside China, questioning the legitimacy of its developmental peace approach in Africa and whether it truly contributes to regional stability or acts as a cover for power extension and resource accumulation.

Besides defying conventional stereotypes and punchy news headlines²⁴ accusing China of "debt diplomacy" "neo-colonialism," and human rights violations,²⁵ various Western politicians have voiced concerns over the legitimacy of its approach. For instance, Karin Kortmann, a parliamentary state secretary in the German Development Ministry, has declared "Our African partners really have to watch out that they will not be facing a new process of colonization" in their relations with China.²⁶ US National Security Adviser John Bolton has added to this that "China uses bribes, opaque agreements, and the strategic use of debt to hold states in Africa captive to Beijing's wishes and demands", asserting that these predatory actions are integral to broader Chinese strategic initiatives, including 'One Belt, One Road'—a plan aimed at establishing trade routes to and from China with the ultimate goal of advancing Chinese global dominance.²⁷

Similar apprehensions are shared by other Western governments, including the UK and France. They view China's involvement in Africa as disruptive to peace, particularly in oil-rich nations like South Sudan and Sudan. Additionally, these Western nations perceive China as supporting authoritarian regimes, exemplified in the case of Gabon. They also criticize China for being a resource and energy-hungry actor, exploiting corrupt governments, seeking opportunistic trade, and contributing significantly to environmental pollution in Africa.²⁸ In response, Chinese academics such as He Wenping aver that "China's behaviour in Africa is no worse and, on balance, probably better than that of the West".²⁹ Many of the critiques seem to lay rooted in the argument that China's non-liberal political system makes it challenging to trust its intentions, as it doesn't align with the democratic peace theory.

Yet the implementation of this theory has faced critiques from within the West itself. While numerous liberal peace scholars argue that economic advancement leads to peace and stability, recent research suggests that emphasizing liberal democracy and marketization may exacerbate, rather than alleviate, the challenges faced by war-torn states.³⁰ Taking in mind the failures of Western interventions in for example Afghanistan and Iraq³¹, scholars like Chung Wong and David Chandler add to this that the application of liberal peace theory has proven ineffective in restoring these governments' self-governance capacity³², resulting in increased dependence on external aid and deficiency in political and social legitimacy.³³

Meanwhile, China's approach to developmental peace has presented an appealing alternative, providing African governments with access to finance, expertise, and development aid without the stringent expectations tied to Western norms of accountability and conditions related to political and economic reforms.³⁴ This alternative was lauded by African Union Chairperson and Rwandan President Paul Kagame during the September 2018 Forum on

²⁰ Benabdallah and Large (2023), p. 219

²¹ Kernen (2010), pp. 252–268

²² The Jamestown Foundation (2010)

²³ Lau (2022), p. 4

²⁴ For example: EFSAS (2017), "The 'New Great Game': China's Debt-Trap Diplomacy"; Karlsson (2020), "An act of neo-colonialism or a win-win relationship?"

²⁵ The predominant existing discourse on Sino-Africa security engagements often appears centres on how it might affect Western capital's interests (see The Economist (2022)) or condemns China for practices historically common among Western powers, including support for dictators, environmental degradation, mineral exploitation, and human rights violations (see Antwi-Boateng (2017)).

²⁶ China Daily (2007 July 17)

²⁷ See: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-national-security-advisor-ambassador-john-r-bolton-trump-administrations-new-africa-strategy/>

²⁸ Marun (6 January 2019)

²⁹ He (2007), p.29

³⁰ Millar (2016)

³¹ Chung (2021), p. 524

³² Campbell et al. (2011)

³³ Heaphey (2022)

³⁴ Marun (6 January 2019)

China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Beijing, characterising it as a catalyst for "deep transformation," and that the collaboration between China and Africa is founded on mutual respect and stands to benefit both partners.³⁵

In taking a critical look at the corresponding binary framework of 'challenger-versus-supporter' that emerges out of the two-sided debate, this research recognizes a more nuanced analysis is necessary to elucidate the political nuances that set apart China's approach from the Western-liberal peace paradigm. Mali's complex conflict-affected setting serves as a microcosm for understanding this rhetorical battle by exploring how the real, not just assumed, policy prescriptions of linking security and development exist under governance of China's developmental peace. Consequently, this thesis will evolve around the following research question: *"How do the intricate political dynamics of linking security and development within China's 'developmental peace' approach, as a form of contestation with the prevailing Western liberal-peace paradigm, manifest in the ongoing conflict in Mali in the period from 2012 until 2023?"* To help systematically unravel this complication, I offer below an outline of the sub-questions, based on the different dimensions of the normative framework guiding peacebuilding efforts.

The first sub-question examines the legitimacy and desirability of international intervention. Tracing the development of Sino-Mali relations from the Cold War era to the present can help uncover how China has adhered to its normative principles of sovereign equality and non-interference while strategically reinterpreting the concept of non-interference in the face of the Malian conflict. The contestation becomes evident as China grapples with maintaining its traditional normative stance while acknowledging the legitimacy of external intervention, challenging the Western liberal peace paradigm that might prioritize intervention for the sake of promoting liberal values.

- 1) How has the Chinese government redefined the liberal conceptualisation of sovereignty and security within its broader engagement in Mali, spanning socio-cultural relations, political and economic links, and an expanding security relationship?
 - a. How has China's emphasis on sovereign equality and non-interference manifested in its diplomatic and economic ties with Mali, established since 1960?
 - b. How has the Chinese government tactically reinterpreted the principle of non-interference in the context of supporting Mali with military aid and actively participating in MINUSMA?

The second sub-question seeks to define the specific actions required for peacebuilding at the hand of discourse analysis. In emphasizing cultural diversity over the universality of liberal democracy and rearticulating the sequencing of peacebuilding elements to prioritize economic development, China contests the liberal paradigm's assumption that democratic institutions are a necessary precursor to peace. Overall, the policy prescriptions for peace interventions thus reflect a divergence in political ideologies and priorities.

- 2) How has China engaged in contesting the primacy of democratic institution-building in its peacebuilding agenda for Mali?
 - a. What specific actions or official statements imply that the Chinese government advocates for the democratisation of the international system?
 - b. What specific actions or official statements demonstrate that China's bilateral programs predominantly focus on economic initiatives?

The third, and last, sub-question aims to identify the implementation principles guiding the operationalization of peacebuilding actions. China's emphasis on developmental programs that demonstrate a context-specific approach, including demonstration projects, non-conditional aid, and small-scale skills transfer, challenges the externally formulated or imposed solutions often associated with the Western liberal peace paradigm. Additionally, China's collaborative role in supporting the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)-led mediation for the Malian crisis underlines its rejection of externally imposed conflict management strategies.

- 3) How does China's emphasis on national ownership and rejection of externally formulated or imposed peacebuilding solutions manifest in (a) programmatic terms and in its (b) conflict management in Mali?
 - a. What Chinese-led developmental programmes in Mali demonstrate that China offers a context specific approach through demonstration, non-conditional aid, and small-scale skills transfer?
 - b. What role does the Chinese government play in supporting ECOWAS-led peaceful mediation for the Malian crisis?

It is essential to note that the central objective here is not to favor one approach over the other, as this would simply add on to the predominantly existing 'external perspectives' on the topic. Instead, this research has employed the case of Mali to demonstrate China's developmental peace offers a distinctively different normative framework peacebuilding. The 'ad hominem' critiques reflected within the existing policy discussions often imply that the West anticipates China to assume a more prominent role in African conflict management, aligning with its comprehensive

³⁵ Mugisha (4 September 2018)

reformist agenda to institutionalize neoliberal elements. This research argues that the enduring Sino-Mali engagement proposes a departure from such paternalistic attitudes in two ways.

First, China's vows for continued support for Mali's peace and security landscape while upholding respect for sovereign equality at international forums. This reflects not only a commitment to international cooperation but also buys the conviction that the hegemonic nature of the current international system should broaden the representation and participation of developing countries. Second, China's practical involvement in peacekeeping and reconstruction in Mali, marked by domestic engagements and no-conditional development assistance implies a preference for shared economic and developmental benefits over promoting democracy or human rights. In addition, China's financial and logistical support contributions for regional peace initiatives, asserts the primary responsibility for resolving conflicts lies with those directly affected, with external forces playing a secondary role at best.

Academic Debate

It was Boutros-Ghali, former UN Secretary General, who first called for the linking of human security and human development in his report 'An Agenda for Peace' in 1992.³⁶ At the turn of the century, particularly with the emergence of the War on Terror in the Global South, this idea gained further prominence within the prevailing global security paradigm that shifted the focus away from safeguarding state interests and borders to prioritizing the safety and wellbeing of a state's citizens.³⁷ Taking in mind that China's 'developmental peace' moves past the traditional perspective that security is solely associated in military terms, as well as given the prevalent challenges in Mali, a country characterized by poverty and recurrent internal conflicts, the concept of the (human) security-development nexus becomes particularly relevant for the purpose of my research project.³⁸

Notwithstanding, this concept needs to be critically assessed, and (re)defined in a way that does not merely reflect a predetermined and hegemonic Western liberal-peace paradigm, which has become the target of substantial critique (as much from Western scholars and policy makers as from governments and local societies of host countries). While numerous liberal peace scholars argue that economic advancement leads to peace and stability, recent research suggests that emphasizing democracy and marketization may exacerbate, rather than alleviate, the challenges faced by war-torn states.³⁹ According to scholars like David Chandler, the application of liberal peace theory through Western interventions has proven ineffective in restoring these governments' self-governance capacity themselves⁴⁰, resulting in increased dependence on external aid and a deficiency in political and social legitimacy.⁴¹

However, to properly understand China's comprehensive approach to peacebuilding it is crucial to first conceptualise 'security' and 'development' respectively. In navigating the challenges and contradictions inherent in diverse conceptions of security within the field of International Relations - ranging from perspectives limiting its scope to immediate, existential threats wielded exclusively by the state to those viewing security as a fundamental aspect of social life or a human good - I consider Gjørøv's analysis⁴² on the two core principles underpinning security to bring clarity. The first principle pertains to negative security, denoting the notion of "security from" threats or conflicts, typically within the framework of state or state actors, such as the military, being the primary agents responsible for safeguarding security. In the onset of 9/11, the US has for example witnessed the nexus gravitating toward a more militarized approach to development.⁴³

In contrast, positive security offers a more proactive perspective, defining security as "the capacity to determine ways to end, mitigate, or adapt to those risks and threats either individually or in concert with other actors".⁴⁴ This second principle posits that conflicts are rooted in economic inequality and poor governance, recognizing the interconnectedness between security and development in conflict-ridden countries.⁴⁵ In their policy paper *Expressions of Sovereignty in Southern Africa*, Buur, Jensen and Stepputat add to this that while the presence of underdevelopment can offer to explain armed conflict, it is equally essential to recognize that the consequences of conflict themselves come with substantial costs. These costs manifest as missed opportunities for development, the destabilization and failure of states, and a decline in human development indicators.⁴⁶

However, as Viktor Johansson rightfully points out, "defining the concept development is as problematic as defining

³⁶ Boutros-Ghali, (1992)

³⁷ United Nations (2004)

³⁸ Mpisane (2015), p. 2

³⁹ Millar (2016)

⁴⁰ Campbell et al. (2011)

⁴¹ Heaphey (2022)

⁴² Gjørøv (2012), p. 835

⁴³ Reid-Henry (2011), p. 97.

⁴⁴ Gjørøv (2012), p. 835

⁴⁵ Paris, (2004)

⁴⁶ Buur et al. (2007), p. 9

security, if not more problematic".⁴⁷ Development meanings have evolved from economic and industrialization links in the 1940s to modernization theory's focus on economic growth, social, and political modernization in the 1980s.⁴⁸ Regardless of the diverse scholarly perspectives within the field, (human) development, as stated in the 2004 report on the IPA's Security-Development Nexus Program, typically refers to the processes and approaches employed by societies and nations to enhance standards of living with a focus on prosperity and equity.⁴⁹

Taking in mind China's perspective on security, where development assumes the role of the guarantor of security and stability, the second principle (of positive security) thus remains relevant, yet the first principle (of negative security), focusing on the mere absence of conflict, does not suffice to signify security, unless there is economic growth or economic satisfaction that goes with social stability. In this way, the very concept of security is defined in development terms. Important to mention hereby is that the development-security nexus, from the Chinese perspective, is not an integration of two separate realms (security and development), or a linear progression where one occurs once the other is achieved. Rather, it is a redefinition of security itself in terms of development and economic stability. In the process of unpacking my research puzzle it is therefore more appropriate to speak of a development-as-security nexus or of development for security than of a security-development nexus.⁵⁰

This perspective – fostering peaceful partnerships that result in shared economic and developmental benefits rather than promoting democracy or human rights - resonates with China and Africa's shared adherence to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence⁵¹, initiated by China, India, and Myanmar in 1954. These principles - Mutual Respect for Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity; Mutual Non-aggression; Non-interference in Each Other's Internal Affairs; Equality and Mutual Benefit; and Peaceful Coexistence - served as a framework for constructing a just and equitable international political and economic order during a period marked by the aftermath of World War II and the rise of the Cold War.⁵² They especially gained widespread acceptance among newly dependent African and Asian developing countries, resonating with the desire to move away from their colonial past and fostering presence in international affairs.³⁷

In view of this, China has become active in providing South-South development assistance to the Global South countries by taking into consideration their own unique features and approaches to synergy, regional and sector distribution as well as aid management.⁵³ It is by successfully interpellating African decision makers into this discourse that Beijing officials have justified increased 'interventions' in peace and security", explains Carozza, a researcher in Sino-African security relations.⁵⁴ Notwithstanding, there are numerous scholars who posit that China serves as a systemic challenger, actively undermining the processes and outcomes of liberal peacebuilding efforts. In the context of conflict resolution, Abdenur contends that China, alongside Russia and India, collaborates to frame the Syrian civil war as primarily an issue of terrorism, challenging the human rights-focused framing presented by the West.⁵⁵ Similarly, Höglund and Orjuela characterize China as an 'illiberal peacebuilding power' in Sri Lanka, suggesting that China shields the Sri Lankan regime from international criticism and reprisals, displaying what they perceive as 'little concern for human rights'.⁵⁶

Furthermore, Kneuer and Demmelhuber argue that China, in conjunction with Russia, actively disseminates authoritarian norms globally⁵⁷, challenging the universalism of liberal democracy and the traditional tools of democracy promotion such as conditionality.⁵⁸ This dual perspective introduces a tension in which China is seen not merely as a passive participant but as an assertive force contributing to the global dissemination of authoritarian norms. Cooley emphasizes that this authoritarian diffusion is gaining momentum in broader international politics, challenging the established norms and principles associated with liberal democracy. As a consequence, the rise of these 'illiberal actors' challenges the effectiveness of traditional tools like conditionality and questions the universal applicability of liberal democratic ideals in the global arena.⁵⁹

Contrary to the perspective of China as a systemic challenger, an alternative body of research contends that China's intentions are not revisionist, positioning it primarily as a status quo actor in peace and development.⁶⁰ Givens

⁴⁷ Johansson (2014), p. 7

⁴⁸ Sumner & Tribe (2008)

⁴⁹ Stan (2004), p. 4

⁵⁰ Benabdallah and Large (2023), pp. 214–15

⁵¹ Carozza (2021), p. 1182

⁵² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2014)

³⁷ Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs (2014).

⁵³ Gouliamos (January 26, 2024)

⁵⁴ Carozza (2019), p. 142

⁵⁵ Abdenur (2016), p. 109

⁵⁶ Höglund and Orjuela (2012), p. 95

⁵⁷ Kneuer and Demmelhuber (2016), p. 775

⁵⁸ Cooley (2015)

⁵⁹ Cooley (2015), p. 50

⁶⁰ Alden and Large (2015) ⁴⁶

Givens (2011)

argues that China maintains an 'indifferent' stance toward democracy, human rights, and liberal norms, suggesting that its actions do not seek to either undermine or consolidate these norms.⁶⁴ Similarly, Dreher and Fuchs find that China's aid and investment do not favor any particular regime type.⁶¹ Johnston adds that China's substantial economic presence in Angola and Ethiopia does not impede the democracy promotion efforts of the West in these countries.⁶²

In the broader context of rising powers, Newman and Zala argue that China's primary aspiration is to challenge the distribution of power within the existing international system rather than contesting the norms and rules underpinning the system.⁶³ Interviews with Chinese scholars and practitioners further illuminate this perspective, emphasizing the compatibility and complementarity between Chinese and liberal approaches. A representative from the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), a think tank of China's Ministry of State Security, contends that China and the West possess distinct strengths in peacebuilding, characterizing their relationship as complementary rather than competitive. The interviewee suggests, "China excels at building high quality and efficient infrastructures, while the West is proficient at promoting norms".⁶⁴ Additionally, a former Chinese peacekeeper argues that there is no contradiction between the two approaches, suggesting that the Chinese approach can revitalize the diminishing influence of liberal peace.⁶⁵

In taking a critical look at this two-sided debate, it turns out that the simplistic binary framework of challenger versus-supporter falls short of capturing the intricacies and dynamism inherent in China's development-as-security approach. In response, some more recent studies increasingly acknowledge the complexity of liberal peace as a field, recognizing that, like many other nations, China can adopt a dual role. Benabdallah for example examines China's engagements in two specific peacebuilding sub-fields, namely peacekeeping and development finance.⁶⁶ The study suggests that while Beijing assumes a status quo position in peacekeeping, it simultaneously challenges prevailing norms in development finance. Richmond and Tellidis argue that this dual role, characterized as a simultaneous 'status quo and critical actor,' is a strategic approach commonly observed in Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) countries, including China.⁶⁷ These recent studies collectively illuminate the potential for countries, including China, to operate both within and outside the confines of liberal peace.

Despite these advancements within the relevant empirical works on the topic, I consider two key deficiencies to persist. Firstly, the notion of 'challenge' lacks a precise operationalization in terms of the political outcomes on the ground, often simply serving as a catch-all for any deviation from liberal peace prescriptions. Such deviations may stem from cultural differences, represent variants of liberal peace, offer acceptable alternatives, or signify revisionist attempts. Therefore, a more nuanced analysis is necessary to elucidate the nature and extent of this so-called 'challenge' posed by China's developmental peace. Secondly, existing studies often adopt a unidimensional approach, examining Chinese peacebuilding activities in isolation, without considering the political dynamics of linking of security and development, let alone placing it in a specific case study context rather than treating the African continent as a single country.

In other words, a more comprehensive assessment of the political norms that exist under Chinese governance and conflict management in Mali should evaluate how the developmental peace approach deviates from the overall normative structure of liberal peace rather than viewing them as independent elements. The critique of the liberal peace paradigm, particularly from the perspective that China is more of a status quo actor, highlights a notable flaw within the discourse. Many critiques, while insightful, tend to be more practical than theoretical, often relying on policy observations. This tendency results in a somewhat paternalistic and top-down approach, lacking sufficient exploration of grassroots dynamics. Herewith contestation theory emerges as a promising avenue to inject more theoretical substance into discussions around peacebuilding. By employing contestation theory, the existing critique and discussions gain a deeper and more meaningful dimension.

Despite its potential, contestation theory has not been applied as extensively as it could be in the academic debate, leaving a gap in the exploration of theoretical frameworks within the realm of peacebuilding. My research fills in this void by adopting the theory of contestation into its analysis. Contestation, as described by Wiener and Deitelhoff & Zimmermann⁶⁸, involves the discursive or non-discursive disapproval of a norm by relevant actors. The inclusion of new actors frequently triggers contestation due to their divergent interpretations of the norm.⁶⁹ However, contestation does not invariably undermine the robustness of a norm; in certain instances, it contributes to clarifying

⁶¹ Dreher and Fuchs (2015)

⁶² Johnston (2003)

⁶³ Newman and Zala (2018)

⁶⁴ Yuan (2022), Interview with a researcher of CICIR specializing in China's policy on Africa, 28 June 2019, Beijing

⁶⁵ Yuan (2022), Interview with a researcher of CICIR specializing in China's policy on Africa, 28 June 2019, Beijing

⁶⁶ Benabdallah (2019)

⁶⁷ Richmond and Tellidis (2014), p. 575

⁶⁸ Wiener (2004); Deitelhoff & Zimmermann (2018)

⁶⁹ Wiener (2004)

its meaning and enhancing inter-subjective acceptance.⁷⁰ This perspective aligns with the ontological position grounded in the broader theory of constructivism⁷¹, demonstrating that most of the core concepts in International Relations, such as state sovereignty, security, and identity are socially constructed, not inherent in nature, and subject to transformation through human action.⁷²

More recent constructivist scholars have revisited this perspective at the hand of social norms, positing a distinct set of normative dynamics more focused on how actors understand the norms that constitute them and alternatively consider how actors that reason through norms can contest and reconstruct the norms that bind communities together.⁷³ By integrating insights from contemporary social theory, the framework of contestation thus offers a complex and innovative attempt at a new generalized account of the role of norms in global politics.⁶⁰ Despite being catalysts for behavioural shifts, norms themselves are often characterized by dynamism and ambiguity, subject to continuous and multi-dimensional contestation. Working within this social constructivist vein is relevant for the purpose of my research; it allows for an analysis of the normative foundations of China's developmental peace approach as a form of contestation with the Western liberal-peace paradigm. Wiener identifies three types of norms underlying global governance.

Fundamental norms, also known as principles or values, represent type 1 norms, characterized by their universal quality. These norms have a broad moral and ethical scope, often negotiated by government representatives at the macro level of governance. They are formalized in treaties such as the United Nations Charter or the Lisbon Treaty of the European Union, rendering them quasi-constitutional in the global context. In contrast, type 2 norms, referred to as organizing principles, are shaped through policy and political practices at the meso-level. Due to their closer proximity to political processes, these norms have meanings more directly linked to stakeholder expectations than fundamental norms. Type 3 norms, encompassing standards and regulations, are the least negotiable. They involve specific directives for implementation by designated norm followers, such as firms or individuals at the micro-level of global society. These norms provide detailed guidelines for adherence and are less subject to negotiation compared to fundamental norms and organizing principles.⁷⁴

Wiener distinguishes between norm change and normative transformation induced by contestation based on the types of norms contested. Norm change refers to alterations in specific norms, while normative transformation implies broader changes in the underlying principles and values associated with those norms. The impact of contestation can vary depending on the level and nature of the norms involved. The Mali case thus provides as microcosm for examining how the policy prescriptions corresponding to the types of norm contestation manifest in China's 'developmental peace' approach, delving into on-the-ground realities beyond superficial comparisons. Herewith contestation theory can help address different dimensions of the diverging norms at stake, offering insights applicable to peacebuilding's varied and complex political dynamics. Regrettably, these valuable insights have received limited attention in research on Chinese peacebuilding. Consequently, my research addresses this literature gap by utilizing Yuan's contestation typology as a concrete analytical tool, contributing thus not only empirically but also theoretically to the understanding of China's developmental peace.

Building further on Wiener's research regarding the contestation of norms, Yuan argues that within an international issue domain, such as peacebuilding, another type of tripartite normative framework exists. Initially, it establishes a normative foundation that identifies a problem and outlines the necessity for international governance. Subsequently, the content norms within the domain prescribe actions to address the identified problem, while implementation principles guide the practical execution of these actions. This framework gives rise to three distinct types of norm contestation: (1) validity contestation challenges the normative foundation by examining the legitimacy and desirability of international intervention; (2) content contestation critiques the prescribed norms, by defining the specific actions required for peacebuilding; and (3) application contestation questions the implementation principles, by identifying the implementation principles guiding the operationalization of peacebuilding actions.⁷⁵

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

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

⁷⁰ Wolf and Zimmermann (2016)

⁷¹ e.g. Wendt (1987)/(1992); Onuf (1989); Kratochwil (1989); Ruggie (1993); Kratochwil and Ruggie (1986)

⁷² Wendt (1992)

⁷³ Hoffman (2010), pp. 1-12 ⁶⁰

Bueger (2017), p. 126

⁷⁴ Wiener (2017), pp. 117-118

⁷⁵ Yuan (2022), pp. 1802-1803

⁷⁶ Yuan (2022), p. 1806

Yuan emphasizes the significance of these three norm types for two main reasons. Firstly, they are inherently distinguishable, though interconnected in intricate ways. Secondly, they represent the diverse functions that norms can fulfil. The normative foundation shapes social categories and justifies actions, embodying a norm's constitutive function. Content norms define what is considered 'good' in addressing a situation, illustrating prescriptive and evaluative functions. Implementation principles guide specific courses of action while restricting others, embodying the regulatory function of norms. Collectively, these three norm types provide a cognitive and evaluative framework for addressing issues within a given domain.⁷⁷

The normative structure of peacebuilding conforms to this tripartite model: The normative basis of peacebuilding justifies the legitimacy and desirability of international intervention in specific situations; content norms specify the required intervention approach for peacebuilding; and implementation principles govern the execution of such intervention.⁷⁸ While the prevailing peacebuilding order exhibits a noticeable liberal orientation in its three constituent parts under the dominance of liberal peace, tensions and contradictions within this framework persist.⁷⁹ Below I offer an outline of into China's discourses and practices within the normative framework of liberal peace since the 2000s. By exploring the types of contestation China has undertaken and the strategies employed in this context serves to guide my own case study analysis step by step.

1. The normative basis of liberal peace and China's validity contestation

The normative foundation of liberal peace is centred on redefining sovereignty and security, particularly through the concept of sovereignty as responsibility (SAR). This redefinition emphasizes that sovereignty involves not only absolute control over territory and people but also "obligations to protect core human rights". The norm also introduces the responsibility of the international community (RIC), framing severe human rights violations as an international security concern beyond the scope of the state system⁸⁰. SAR and RIC collectively constitute the normative basis of liberal peace.⁸¹

They reconceptualize security threats, including wars, structural violence, and widespread human suffering, thereby broadening the scope of situations requiring intervention. Furthermore, they imply a more profound purpose for peacebuilding, where external interventions aim not only to address the symptoms of conflicts but also to foster "responsible" and capable sovereignty, addressing the root causes of conflicts. Challenges to the validity of this normative foundation may manifest in two ways: (1) rejecting the liberal interpretation of sovereignty and peace; and (2) disputing the automaticity of external intervention when the notion of "peace" is under threat.⁸²

While China has strategically embraced liberal peace principles, its adherence to a classic interpretation of sovereignty persists, with occasional deviations influenced by its national interests and global peer dynamics. The cautiousness exhibited by China reflects concerns over the expansive definition of "conflict situations" and the arbitrary operationalization of peace missions since the 2000s.⁶⁸ Such intricate political nuances become particularly relevant when taking in mind China's dedication to fostering a strong and enduring partnership with Mali since its diplomatic and economic ties in the 1960's.⁸³

2. The content norms of liberal peace and China's content contestation

The prescribed norms of liberal peace, which allows external actors to address identified threats to peace in domestic settings, is characterized by the combination of liberal democracy and a market economy. This paradigm advocates a reformist agenda that seeks to institutionalize neoliberal elements comprehensively.⁸⁴ UN peace missions since the Cold War's end have mostly featured "maximalist" and "moderate" operations, focusing on establishing "decent governance" in conflict-affected societies.⁸⁵

Maximalist mandates, especially post-2000, emphasize the implementation of a neoliberal package, including human rights promotion, civil society-building, economic reforms, the rule of law, and security sector reform. Exclusion of these elements is often depicted as compromising or even contradicting liberal peacebuilding efforts.⁸⁶ While debates surround the feasibility and effects of rapid democratization in post-conflict

⁷⁷ Yuan (2022), pp. 1802–3

⁷⁸ Yuan (2022), p. 1803

⁷⁹ see Richmond (2006)

⁸⁰ Richmond (2006), p. 299; Deng (2010)

⁸¹ Yuan (2022), pp. 1803–4

⁸² Yuan (2022), pp. 1803–4 ⁶⁸

Foot (2011)

⁸³ Ogunsanwo (1974), p. 216

⁸⁴ Richmond (2006); Call and Cook (2003)

⁸⁵ Hellmüller (2021), p.6

⁸⁶ Höglund and Orjuela (2012)

environments, liberal democracy is generally considered synonymous with "effective, inclusive, and accountable" governance.⁸⁷ Economic development, however, holds secondary importance in liberal peace. Contestation of content may focus on specific elements, such as opposing transitional justice in peace operations, or question the sequencing of peacebuilding elements, challenging the primacy of democratic institution-building.⁸⁸

While demonstrating openness to the normative underpinnings of liberal peace, China engages in contesting the neo-liberal elements of peacebuilding or the primacy of democratic institution-building. Notably, it introduces a distinctive element into the peacebuilding agenda by advocating for the democratization of the international system. This perspective asserts that reforms at the international level are imperative for achieving domestic peace, as the current hegemonic and exclusive nature of the international system often contributes to conflicts and impedes the development of fragile states.⁸⁹

The call for international system democratization carries both material and normative implications, aiming to broaden the representation and participation of developing countries, including China, in existing international institutions. Simultaneously, it underscores a preference for cultural diversity over the universality of liberal democracy.⁹⁰ Consequently, this approach seeks to dilute the power and influence of the US/West, aligning with China's grand strategy of a peaceful rise.

In addition to advocating for the democratization of the international system, China adopts an alternative sequencing of established peacebuilding elements. Here, economic development, political stability, and immediate societal needs take precedence over democratic institution-building.⁹¹ The rationale behind this sequencing is mostly functional. Chinese discourse argues that the rights to subsistence and development should prevail over civil and political rights.⁹² In practical terms, China's bilateral programs in conflict-affected settings predominantly focus on economic initiatives.

3. The principles of implementation and China's application contestation

The implementation principles of liberal peace often appertain to intrusive and coercive policy tools.⁹³ External actors commonly use mechanisms such as shaping language in peace agreements, instructing post-conflict states to implement settlements, imposing financial conditionality, and, in extreme cases, using force to impose peace resolutions or post-conflict orders.⁹⁴ The "local turn" in liberal peace attempts to address external actors' dominance by acknowledging the local as an agent of peacebuilding but still places the international community in a determining role regarding the legitimacy and viability of local actors and initiatives.⁹⁵ Contestation in application may oppose intrusive methods of implementing externally formulated peace solutions, irrespective of the goals and content of these solutions. In summary, liberal peace is underpinned by a normative structure encompassing the normative foundation, content, and implementation principles of peacebuilding, and various forms of contestation can challenge specific aspects of this structure.⁹⁶

China's opposition to liberal peace is evident through its application contestation, particularly in its emphasis on national ownership and rejection of externally formulated or imposed peacebuilding solutions. In stark contrast to the local turn discourse, China's approach does not involve mere adjustments to externally formulated templates. Instead, it asserts that local actors, specifically domestic governments, should have the ultimate authority in deciding the peacebuilding agenda. This insistence on equal footing, friendly consultations, and avoiding attempts to force solutions on conflict-affected countries reflects China's view that external actors should play auxiliary and supportive roles in peacebuilding processes. In programmatic terms, China abstains from "educating or reforming natives" but opts for demonstrating success through demonstration, nonconditional aid, and small-scale skills transfer. In conflict management, China adopts a style termed "incentivizing mediation," as described by Hirono.⁹⁷ This approach involves bringing warring parties to the negotiation table without structuring negotiations, creating temporal constraints, redefining issues, or proposing alternatives.

⁸⁷ The UN Secretary-General (2015), p. 3

⁸⁸ Yuan (2022), p. 1804

⁸⁹ He (2017)

⁹⁰ Permanent Mission of China to the UN (2004); see also Foot (2020)

⁹¹ Kuo (2015); He (2017); Kerr and Xu (2014); Wang (2018)

⁹² The Information Office of China's State Council (2013)

⁹³ Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013)

⁹⁴ Paris (2002)

⁹⁵ Von Billerbeck (2015); Mac Ginty (2008)

⁹⁶ Yuan (2022), pp. 1804-1805

⁹⁷ Hirono (2019)

Yuan's emphasis on the interconnected yet distinguishable nature of these contestation types perfectly aligns with the intricate political dynamics this research has aimed to dissect. The tripartite normative framework provides a structured lens through which to discern the interplay between different forms of contestation within China's 'developmental peace' approach and how they collectively shape the political landscape in Mali. Besides, the typology's recognition of the diverse functions that norms can fulfil is pertinent to understanding the broader implications of China's developmental peace approach. It enables to explore not only how China's approach deviates from the predominantly existing norms but also how the complexity and nuances in contestation contribute to shaping alternative norms or frameworks in the realm linking security and development.

Methodology

This thesis takes on a qualitative approach which offers the advantage of enabling the interpretation of Yuan's tripartite normative framework of contestation to unravel the political dynamics on the ground. Ultimately, this has guided the research toward deriving inductive and context-specific insights to examine broader policy implications (e.g., in the Sahel region). Given the constraint of not having been able to conduct interviews or fieldwork, this research employed various qualitative research methods to analyse and interpret relevant data to the greatest extent feasible:

- Literature Review:
Conducting a thorough literature review, which involved systematically reviewing and summarizing existing generalising literature and empirical works is a fundamental qualitative research method to help sketch out the key debates surrounding the topic and introduces me to relevant theoretical frameworks and guiding concepts. Furthermore, existing empirical works served well in outlining the historical evolution of China's engagement in Mali, providing crucial insights into the corresponding political dynamics over time.
- Content Analysis/(Policy) Document Analysis:
Content analysis involved systematically analysing the content of texts, documents, or media to identify patterns, themes, and meanings. Since the core goal is to identify the political intricacies of linking security and development that set apart the China's developmental peace approach from the liberal peace paradigm, this research primarily employed (policy) document analysis. This included analysing relevant policy briefs, government papers, or formal statements that were to my availability online, as to extract the official stance, strategies and actions guiding the Chinese government in tackling the ongoing conflict in Mali.
- Discourse Analysis:
This qualitative method examines the language and communication patterns within texts to uncover underlying ideologies and power structures. Analysing how China's approach is discussed in literature and policy reports has helped to reveal aspects of China's validity, content, and application contestation that are essential in uncovering the political dynamics on the ground. Therefore, this research also employed discourse analysis to help operationalise Yuan's typology of contestation.

In the framework of contestation theory grounded in the ontological position of social constructivism, norms play a dual role within the ontology of structures, systems, conditions, processes, and interactions.⁹⁸ As integral components of social structures and systems, norms represent established standards guiding behaviour and contributing to the overall social order. Simultaneously, norms are dynamic elements subject to the ontological category processes and interactions⁹⁹, forming focal points of disagreement and negotiation within the contestation framework. In the context of the ongoing conflict in Mali, norms become tangible through the governance that exists under the developmental peace concept (such as through Chinese-led developmental projects). The contestation against liberal peace norms hereby reflects a dynamic process of negotiating meanings and implications, shaping the social reality within which the research is situated.

In essence, norms are critical elements in untangling the epistemological puzzle, offering insights into differing conceptualizations of the 'security-development-nexus' and contributing to an explanatory understanding of China's 'developmental peace' framework in contrast to Western norms. It is worth mentioning here that this research does not cover every aspect of China's contestation comprehensively. Given the extensive nature of the peacebuilding subject, a deliberate selection has been made to focus on the most relevant Chinese-government led programs and conflict management instances, such as vocational training centres in S nougou and Kabala, and ECOWAS-led mediation, which serve as benchmarks for evaluating China's application contestation. Hence the analytical framework systematically guided the sampling of sources, directing attention towards revealing norm contestation against the liberal peace. For instance, in analysing content contestation at the hand of the official website of the

⁹⁸ Mason (2018), p. 4

⁹⁹ Mason (2018), p. 4

Chinese embassy in Mali, the focus was specifically on identifying official statements reflecting China's emphasis on cultural diversity over democratic institution building.

While on the one hand it is essential to note that the central objective here is not to conduct a systematic comparison between Western and Chinese approaches to the nexus as such an approach could risk oversimplifying the roles of Western donors and Chinese actors, adding on to the predominantly existing 'external perspectives' on the topic. On the other hand, considering contestation theory serves as the analytical frame, this research thus inevitably extends into a comparative puzzle: examining the 'developmental peace' paradigm against the normative structure of liberal peace helps to grasp the application of China's approach to the nexus. Besides, this comparative lens has allowed, in the concluding remarks, an inclusion of a brief assessment on the extent to which the wide ranging Western liberal critiques directed at China's evolving role in the African peace and security landscape hold true.

Recognizing the significance of transparency, it is important to outline certain ethical issues and other limitations to my research. The primary reliance on data sourced from China's official discourse, including policy statements from the embassy, ambassadors, Chinese leaders, UN representatives, and Chinese-based scholars, may introduce potential bias. Additionally, my personal interest in fostering a more appreciative stance toward the concept of developmental peace, as opposed to the liberal peace approach, could influence the selection of data and interpretation of findings. Moreover, the analysis might lack a counterbalance to Western accusations, particularly pertinent to liberal peace principles like human rights protection, as under Chinese norm construction its policy prescriptions simply do not refer to such aspects.

In navigating these challenges also reveals an inherent paradox. Language barriers and literary bias, given my proficiency in English and Dutch only, pose challenges in accessing non-Western primary sources. Attending a Dutch university grants me higher access to Western material, but the availability of Chinese or African sources is limited, compounded by potential challenges such as censorship and conflict. While reports from international organizations attempt a pan-global representation, their historical ties to Western influence may introduce bias, measuring situations against Western norms and standards. This partiality is problematic, especially as the research aims to provide an objective analysis of political realities.

Although I was not in the position to compensate entirely for this gap (due to lack of time and unavailability of tools to learn the Chinese language or conduct stakeholder interviews/fieldwork myself), efforts have been made to incorporate as many Chinese and local perspectives as possible. These include a wide range of statements and publications accessed through the official websites of the Chinese Embassy in Mali, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, and the Permanent Mission of China to the UN. Furthermore, evidence for my research findings is supported by Benabdallah and Large's fieldwork observations in Mali, Afro barometer surveys, informal surveys and interviews based in Bamako, as well as Chinese-based news agencies like Xinhua and China Daily, China Global Television Network, and Malian experts like the Bamako-based investigative journalist David Dembélé and Professor Salif Diallo.

The research findings have been accordingly structured chapter by chapter: Chapter 1 serves to present a narrative structure of the Sino-Mali engagement since 1960., covering socio-cultural, political, and economic aspects, and highlighting China's principles of sovereign equality and non-interference. It then examines China's evolving acceptance of the normative foundations of liberal peace, exploring how its developmental peace paradigm reshapes interpretations of sovereignty and peace, particularly in the context of military aid to Mali since 2012 (validity contestation). Chapter 2, delves into China's content contestation of liberal peace norms, discussing its emphasis on cultural diversity, advocacy for international democratization, and a focus on economic initiatives over democratic institution-building in Mali. Chapter 3 examines China's application contestation, which becomes evident through its preference for local solutions for local problems. This final chapter illustrates China's context-specific approach in programmatic terms, with local aspirations for technological skill transfer and economic development, non-conditional assistance, and rejecting paternalistic frameworks. It also showcases China's emphasis on diplomatic solutions and support for Mali's counterterrorism efforts.

Chapter 1 China's Validity Contestation:

A Strategic Acceptance of the Liberal Basis?

1.1 The Principles of Sovereign Equality and Non-Interference

Prior to the colonial era, which began in the 13th century, Mali served as a prominent trade centre in West Africa. Archaeological evidence, such as the discovery of Chinese ceramics in Timbuktu, suggests indirect interactions between China and Mali during this period. However, direct diplomatic ties between the two nations were only established in September 1960, a month after Mali gained independence from France.¹⁰⁰ During the intense Sino-Soviet tensions of the 1960s, Mali adeptly navigated diplomatic relations with both China and the Soviet Union, a strategy also employed by other African nations.

Lucy Corkin observes that African leaders during the Cold War era skilfully aligned with ideological patrons to secure material support.¹⁰¹ Mali's first president, Modibo Keita, successfully played this game, receiving comprehensive aid and military support from both the Soviet Union and China, despite Beijing's cautionary notes about Soviet imperialist tendencies.¹⁰² In contrast to some African nations, Mali avoided taking sides during the Sino-Soviet disputes, embodying what Alaba Ogunsanwo termed "a practical application of the non-alignment principle developed during the Cold War."¹⁰³

Nonetheless, Mali's inclination towards Mao's China over the Soviet Union or France was evident in its anti-imperialist ideology¹⁰⁴ and President Keita's socialist approach to economic development.¹⁰⁵ This alignment was further solidified when in February 1961 the two nations formalized a goods and exchange payment agreement which outlined the export of goods from China to Mali including machinery, farm equipment, scientific instruments, electrical appliances, chemicals, medical apparatus, metalware, and steel products. Given Mali's limited capacity to reciprocate with exports to China this accord is best described as an economic engagement formalising Chinese aid.¹⁰⁶

Only shortly after the signing of the Sino-Mali economic and technical cooperation agreement in September 1961, the newly made commitments were already translated into tangible actions: By 1962, Chinese agricultural experts were on the ground in the capital city Bamako initiating irrigation projects, specifically focused on rice and sugar plantations. Notably, the success of the sugar plantation initiative prompted China to extend further economic and technical support for the construction of Mali's inaugural sugar refinery in the Segou region. Upon its completion in 1964, this refinery enabled Mali to process 400 tonnes of sugarcane daily, facilitating the export of sugar within the region and beyond.¹⁰⁷

This more comprehensive approach marked a departure from the conventional practice during Mali's early days of independence, when most external actors limited their involvement to supplying equipment or providing funds for the country's supposed economic development. Instead of expecting Mali to independently execute projects, China went a step further by constructing factories and handing them over upon completion.¹⁰⁸ Regular high-profile Sino-Mali visits in 1963/1964, whereby various projects were initiated with Chinese funding and supervision¹⁰⁹, demonstrated the widespread appreciation of the proactive measures provided by the Chinese development assistance model.

During his visit to Mali in January 1964, Premier Zhou Enlai shared China's experiences in national development with a focus on strengthening the ruling party, eradicating remnants of colonialism, and emphasizing the significance of preserving economic independence.¹¹⁰ In response, President Keita conveyed his "warm homage to the P.R.C. for the low cost of its technical assistance, for the readiness of its technicians to adapt themselves to the life of our people, for the speed and competence with which the projects undertaken by the People's China are carried out one by one, and all these things are done without the slightest intention of interfering in our internal affairs".¹¹¹ Mali, in breaking away from its colonial past, thus clearly perceived China as a benevolent development partner, distinctly different from France and other Western counterparts, with no ambitions of hegemony or unsolicited meddling in its domestic matters.

¹⁰⁰ Esterhuyse & Moctar (2012), p. 2

¹⁰¹ Corkin (2013), p. 2

¹⁰² Roberto et al (2013), p. 73

¹⁰³ Ogunsanwo (1974), p. 217

¹⁰⁴ Idem, p. 216

¹⁰⁵ Boko (2012), p. 12

¹⁰⁶ Ogunsanwo (1974), p. 86

¹⁰⁷ Hodzi (2019), p. 146

¹⁰⁸ Anda (2000), p. 218

¹⁰⁹ Peking Review (1964), p.6

¹¹⁰ Zeng (2014)

¹¹¹ Ogunsanwo (1974), pp. 159-160

Impressed by President Keita's anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist rhetoric and the gratitude expressed by Malians for China's assistance, Premier Zhou and Chairman Liu Shao-chi invited the Malian leader to visit Beijing. Subsequently, during this visit in November 1964, the in 1981 established economic and technical cooperation was put further into effect under the signing Sino-Mali Treaty of Friendship. This paved the way for a series of subsequent economic and trade agreements including Chinese technical and financial assistance for the construction of essential infrastructure, including the Guinea-Mali railway, a radio transmitter, a cinema, and a hotel in Mali.¹¹²

Furthermore, the Chinese government generously shouldered three-quarters of the project costs and committed to dispatching technicians to oversee and contribute to the projects. Additional projects were financed through a US\$3 million credit facility, a notable instance of an African nation, in this case, President Keita's government, seeking loans and development assistance from China. In fact, this marked one of the initial instances of such financial collaboration and set a precedent for the nature of future Sino-Mali engagements.¹¹³

Given Mali's landlocked, semi-desert, and economically challenged status, President Modibo Keita found merit in the Chinese development assistance model that offered not only financial support but also dispatched skilled personnel to actively implement aid and infrastructure projects in various sectors, particularly agriculture, infrastructure, and rail construction. Among the noteworthy projects supported by China were the establishment of a match factory in Bamako in 1967, the construction of a textile mill in Segou in 1968, and the development of a tea plantation and cement works. Given Mali's limited strategic mineral resources, (especially compared with its neighbour Niger, endowed with rich uranium reserves) China, primarily relying on gold production as its dominant mineral commodity¹¹⁴, strategically prioritized infrastructure development and agricultural initiatives.

This focus on mutually beneficial projects, underscoring forms of development aid and assistance, became symbolic of China's dedication to fostering a strong and enduring partnership with Mali.¹¹⁵ The equal share in this commitment takes on added significance when considering how during Keita's presidency, Mali adopted socialist policies, making it one of the African nations with the most openly pro-Chinese stance before the political landscape shifted dramatically when Keita was ousted in a coup d'état on November 19, 1968.¹¹⁶ Hereafter the Comité Militaire de Libération Nationale (CMLN—Military Committee of National Liberation) governed Mali until 1979, under Lieutenant Moussa Traoré.

Over his ten-year rule, the nation witnessed a decline in the economy, stagnant development, rampant corruption, and an abuse of power. In response to these challenges, internal resistance emerged, culminating in a failed coup attempt in 1978. Unfazed by the rebellion, Traoré intensified his grip on power, resorting to ruthless purges of political and military adversaries, along with the outright banning of opposition political parties.¹¹⁷ While the diverse diplomatic approach during Traoré's leadership led to Mali being criticised as politically opportunistic, the Chinese government refrained from intervening or making public statements, demonstrating a lack of allegiance to deposed governments.

In fact, Beijing continued to maintain a non-interventionist stance even when Traoré was deposed in 1992. Amadou Touré, who promptly formed a transitional committee that facilitated the adoption of a new constitution, handed over power to the democratically elected government of Alpha Oumar Konaré. Marking the establishment of Mali's first democratically elected government since gaining independence, Konaré's victory ushered in a period of political stability and democratic transitions.¹¹⁸ By the turn of the century, trade and economic ties transitioned beyond mere aid and assistance to engagements in Mali's agricultural sector and construction industry, opening substantial opportunities for both Chinese state-owned and private enterprises.

Chinese investments in Mali's agricultural sector thrived, leading to cotton becoming China's largest import from Mali, and trade value increased from US\$23.35 million in 2002 to approximately US\$130 million in 2010.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, Mali received substantial financial support, including three debt reliefs granted by China in 2001, 2006, and 2008. It is crucial to note here that the Chinese provision of robust economic aid did not lead to losses on either side; instead, it further epitomized a mutually beneficial relationship. In line with the principles outlined in the Eight Principles of China's Assistance to African Countries, as articulated by Premier Zhou Enlai during his visit to Africa

¹¹² Hodzi (2019), p.146

¹¹³ Hodzi (2019), pp. 145-6

¹¹⁴ Anda (2000), p. 218; Soto-Viruet (2012), p. 28.1

¹¹⁵ Ogunsanwo (1974), p. 216

¹¹⁶ Esterhuyse & Moctar (2012), p. 2

¹¹⁷ Hodzi (2019), p. 148-9

¹¹⁸ Hodzi (2019), pp. 144–48

¹¹⁹ Hodzi (2019), p. 147-8

in 1964, China viewed its financial aid not as a unilateral grant but as part of a reciprocal process, emphasizing mutual benefits for both nations.¹²⁰

However, from 2012 onwards, China's involvement in Malian security intensified, arguably even at the cost of departing from its normative foundation anchored in the principles of sovereign equality and non-interference.¹²¹ Or rather, as will become clear from the following section, China's development-as-security approach, extending beyond conventional boundaries of military aid and UN peacekeeping, strategically challenged the liberal vision of peace and sovereignty.

Quick glance of China-Mali relations:¹²²

1960: Mali gains independence from France
1960: China-Mali establish diplomatic ties
1961: China-Mali sign trade agreement
1964: China-Mali sign "Friendship Treaty"
2001: China-Mali sign sanitary cooperation agreement
2001: China provides Mali first debt relief
2002: China-Mali sign economic and technical cooperation agreement
2004: China-Mali sign scientific and technical cooperation agreement
2006: China provides Mali second debt relief
2008: China provides Mali third debt relief
2010: China-Mali establish an Economic, Trade and Technological Joint Committee
2013/2014: China sends peacekeepers to Mali

1.2 China's Non-Interference in Malian Security

In early 2013, Mali faced a significant security crisis in its northern regions.¹²³ The civil war in Libya since 2011 had repercussions across the Sahel region, with insurgents and extremists infiltrating northern Mali. A separatist movement in Mali's desolate north-eastern region, combined with the emergence of groups like Ansar Dine and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), heightened instability.¹²⁴ The situation deteriorated further when a military coup in March 2012 led to the ousting of President Amadou Toumani Touré.¹²⁵

Instead of strengthening Mali's armed forces, the coup resulted in mutinies and disorder, allowing rebel groups to expand their control. The capture of Timbuktu in April 2012 and the strategic town of Konna in January 2013 underscored the vulnerability of Mali's capital, Bamako, to these rebel forces.¹²⁶ Meanwhile, the interim military government grew increasingly worried that the escalating insecurity could not be tackled without international military assistance.¹²⁷

The upheaval in Mali, leading to the secession of the Tuareg region by Islamic rebels, prompted intervention from West African nations and the global community. In an unusual move, China extended support to the Malian military in combating the Islamist rebels¹²⁸, a departure from its typical reluctance for direct involvement. Justifying its actions, China argued that the northern militia posed not only as an opposition rebel group but also as a terrorist threat.¹²⁹ Beijing supplied the Malian Army with logistics equipment valued at 5 million Euros between 2012 and 2013. The selection of the size and type of military aid was meticulous, as it allowed China to show symbolic support for the Malian people in their struggles without overtly interfering in their internal political affairs.¹³⁰

¹²⁰ Zeng (2014)

¹²¹ Duchâtel et al (2014), p. 1

¹²² Esterhuysen and Moctar (2014), p. 2

¹²³ Rettman (2012); Heisbourg (2013), pp. 7-18; Fassy (2012)

¹²⁴ Shaw, pp. 199-210; Black; Boås and Torheim, pp. 1279-92 (2013)

¹²⁵ Lecocq et al. (2013), pp. 635-55; Wing (2015), pp. 451-475

¹²⁶ Polgreen and Sayare (2013); Hammer (2014)

¹²⁷ Lecocq et al. (2013); United Nations Security Council Secretary-General's Report S/894 (2012)

¹²⁸ Dembele (26 September 2012)

¹²⁹ Diallo (30 January 2013)

¹³⁰ Benabdallah and Large (2020), p. 13

At the same time, the Chinese government in Beijing expressed concern about the potential spill-over of another civil conflict into a region where it had burgeoning socio-economic interests¹³¹. Over the last 30 years China has been investing in the Sahel's local infrastructure to obtain diplomatic support for the purchase in natural resources; a trend only further evolving with the onset of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013.¹³² Additionally, there was a palpable unease regarding France's Opération Serval - which aimed to oust Islamic militants from the north - with fears that it might represent a subtle attempt to reinstate French dominance in the Sahel, particularly in light of Chinese dissatisfaction with perceived mishandling of UN resolutions during the onset of the Libyan civil war.¹³³

Notably departing from Beijing's conventional stance of non-interference in the sovereign affairs of individual states, China had chosen to abstain in a UNSC vote in March 2011, establishing a "no-fly zone" over Libyan airspace to enable the UN to safeguard civilians from attacks. However, Beijing was disheartened by subsequent NATO airstrikes on Libya, hastening the downfall of the Gaddafi regime—actions that China deemed a blatant violation of a UNSC mandate, potentially setting a precedent.¹³⁴

While the latter increasingly directed Chinese attention towards the broader regional implications of Mali's potential violent disintegration, the government in Beijing, having initially endorsed the establishment of MINUSMA, made the subsequent decision to actively engage in the peacekeeping mission.¹²¹ During the early days of the crisis, President Ouédraogo of ECOWAS urged global support for the regional initiative on Mali, emphasizing collaboration with the UN, AU, and development partners.¹²² Specifically seeking China's assistance, President Ouédraogo and VP McIntosh appealed to China for support¹³⁵, leading to an increased Chinese involvement in Mali's peacekeeping efforts.¹³⁶

China, operating under a non-intervention policy, recognized the legitimacy of intervention when formally requested by a nation, aligning with its commitment to safeguarding national sovereignty.¹³⁷ Mali's plea resonated with China's principles, prompting intervention to protect territorial integrity and maintain its reputation as a trusted advisor to African nations.¹³⁸ This nuanced approach underscores China's willingness to intervene upon invitation or with regional entity approval¹³⁹, balancing its sovereignty principles and mutual benefit considerations.¹⁴⁰

Consequently, in December 2013, China dispatched 135 personnel, including engineers, medical staff, and, notably for the first time, combat forces with a mandate extending beyond the mere protection of Chinese forces. This contingent served as an advance team for an overall initial force of 395 individuals within the UN operation. By December 2017, China had deployed five peacekeeping missions to Mali, with just under four hundred Chinese personnel on the ground by the end of that year. In February 2018, members of the fifth Chinese MINUSMA force were selected to receive the UN's Peace Medal of Honour as recognition for their service. As of April, that same year, confirmation was provided for a sixth detachment of 395 peacekeepers scheduled for the following month.¹⁴¹

More recently, MINUSMA's primary focus, established under UNSC Resolution 2100, is to assist in the implementation of the Algiers Peace Agreement signed by the Malian government and the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad, a coalition of northern rebel groups, in 2015.¹⁴² In June 2019, UNSC Resolution 2480 extended MINUSMA's mandate until June 30, 2020. As of January 2020, the mission had a budget of US\$1,221,420,600 approved for the period from July 2019 to June 2020, with a total of 15,441 deployed personnel, including 11,620 troops. China contributed 426 members.¹⁴³

It is important to stress here that only 170 of China's peacekeepers stationed in Mali are soldiers, while the majority are engineers, medical personnel, and other peacekeepers assigned to complete the construction of a hospital in Gao, where the Chinese contingent is based. Chinese peacekeeping engineers frequently engaged in projects such as road construction, building security checkpoints, providing clean water to local communities, road paving, and constructing fences around public schools in Gao.¹⁴⁴ Whereas China had perhaps developed a greater understanding

¹³¹ Lanteigne (2019), p. 643

¹³² Cuscito (2023)

¹³³ Azevzov and Smit (2014)

¹³⁴ Garwood-Gowers (2012), pp. 375–393; Snetkov and Lanteigne (2015), pp. 113–146

¹²¹ Lanteigne (2019), pp. 643–644 ¹²² ReliefWeb (18 June 2012):

¹³⁵ Economic Community of West African States (18 May 2013)

¹³⁶ Dorman (2014), p. 56

¹³⁷ Carlson (2006), p. 217

¹³⁸ Dorman (2014), p. 55

¹³⁹ Sutter (2012), p. 8

¹⁴⁰ Murithi (2008), pp. 73–74

¹⁴¹ United Nations 'Summary of Contributions to UN Peacekeeping by Country, Mission and Post / Police, UN Military Experts on Mission, Staff Officers, and Troops' (2018); Ministry of National Defence of the People's Republic of China (2018)

¹⁴² Giffen and Smith (2019)

¹⁴³ United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (2015)

¹⁴⁴ Xinhua (12 July 2013)

and appreciation of SAR and RIC, the composition of Chinese peacekeeping personnel, promoting non-politicized state-directed infrastructure-led economic development, still strongly underscored its traditional support for Westphalian sovereignty.

Since the establishment of MINUSMA, the Mali conflict has thus served as a significant case study to explore China's strategical reinterpretation of its normative stance on non-interference. To begin with, the choice to dispatch combat forces to a UN mission marked a pivotal moment, considering that Beijing had previously favoured limiting its contributions of UN personnel to civilian police, typically drawn from civilian units and the People's Armed Police (PAP), along with engineers, medical professionals, and other support staff. The strategic element of the force was selected from the 16th Combined Corps of the Shenyang Military Area Command of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).¹⁴⁵

This matter had been a sensitive topic in Chinese policy circles, tracing back to 2006 when Beijing deliberated on incorporating combat forces into its contribution to UN peacekeeping operations in Lebanon but ultimately decided against it. While the Chinese government did acknowledge the enhanced security aspect of its involvement in the Mali operation, it did so in a subdued manner, downplaying the military dimension of its participation. Chinese policymakers have for example refrained from explicitly endorsing liberal norms like the responsibility to protect (R2P), which directly challenges the non-interference principle.¹³⁴ Furthermore, China remains reserved about Western and UN efforts prioritizing the "protection of civilians" (POC), reflecting its nuanced approach to global norms and interventions.¹³⁵

Instead, China's rationale for entering the mission emphasises on protecting a regime rather than undermine or overthrow it, and thereby considering the inclusion of a security force component as a contribution to international peacekeeping and stabilisation efforts rather than direct interference with Malian sovereign affairs.¹⁴⁶ An editorial in the *China Daily* argues that while France's efforts aimed to curb the spread of radical extremism in the Sahel, the fundamental issue was the widespread poverty in Mali and the surrounding region.¹⁴⁷

Addressing this poverty was deemed crucial to prevent the resurgence of extremist groups in the area. Even before the launch of the French operation, Chinese government officials had viewed the deteriorating situation in the Sahel region as a consequence of underdevelopment and diplomatic shortcomings. In a speech at the UNSC in December 2012, Ambassador Li Baodong underscored that the solution for Mali and the surrounding region required not only enhanced international coordination of aid and assistance but also a proactive role by regional governments and stakeholders in peacebuilding.¹⁴⁸

Whereas the concept of the security–development nexus has long been integral to the Western liberal peace paradigm which, while emphasizing democracy and human rights, asserts that development's positive impacts, such as poverty reduction and improved well-being, can contribute to local and international security.¹³⁹ In contrast, China's perspective on the nexus prioritizes the promotion of regime stability, placing significance on sovereignty and government.¹⁴⁹ As asserted by Benabdallah, China's historical experience with political interference in economic development has instilled a strong conviction in the necessity of economic growth for maintaining internal order and preventing challenges to ruling elites.¹⁵⁰

Although the latter does not inherently reject the assumption that democracies are more peaceful over time¹⁵¹, Carozza argues that China intentionally distinguishes its approach from that of Western powers as a strategic move to enhance the attractiveness of its peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts to African leaders wary of foreign interference.¹⁵² The author further explains that the incorporation of the security–development nexus into China's Africa discourse was feasible due to pre-existing familiar discourses and policies.¹⁵³ Xi Jinping, in 2014, emphasized the interdependence of development and security, stating that "sustainability means paying equal attention to development and security," emphasizing that development is foundational to security, and vice versa.¹⁵⁴

Premier Li Keqiang echoed this sentiment in 2014, asserting that "without a peaceful and stable environment, development will not be possible".¹⁵⁵ A joint statement by Chinese and African ministries in 2013 emphasized a

¹⁴⁵ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Nepal (December 2013)

¹³⁴ Mabera (2021), pp. 143-144 ¹³⁵ Teitt 2012.

¹⁴⁶ Murray (2013); Hille (2013); Foot (2014), p. 1087

¹⁴⁷ Gosset (2013)

¹⁴⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (December 2012) ¹³⁹ Duffield (2010), p. 74

¹⁴⁹ Richmond (2011); (2015); Tom (2017)

¹⁵⁰ Benabdallah (2016), p. 20

¹⁵¹ Kuo (2020), p. 15; Zhao (2011)

¹⁵² Carozza (2021), p. 15; Kuo (2015)

¹⁵³ Carozza (2021), p. 15

¹⁵⁴ Xi Jinping (3 September 2018)

¹⁵⁵ Li Keqiang (2014)

balanced approach to the relationship between peace, security, stability, and development, advocating for comprehensive measures to address the root causes of conflicts and regional disputes through dialogue and consultations. In this context, the acceptance of the nexus by African leaders is notable, as they generally welcome China's economic aid as a means to simultaneously promote development and stability.¹⁵⁶

Fung adds to this that China's developmental peace model draws on historical experiences, distancing itself from Western neo-colonialism and resonating with the global south's shared identity.¹⁵⁷ In concrete terms, over 35 million Chinese individuals suffered casualties during the aggression by Japanese militarists. World War II witnessed the collective efforts of African nations, Mali included, fighting alongside allied countries. The sacrifice of African lives on the battlefield became a poignant contribution to the ultimate triumph of the war, the preservation of global peace, and the ascendancy of justice over malevolence.¹⁵⁸

The prompt commitment of personnel for the Mali mission thus presented China, in acknowledging the growing nexus between poverty and insecurity, an opportunity to further position itself as an alternative provider of security in the developing world, particularly in unstable African regions like the Sahel. In fact, the Mali situation allowed China to showcase and compare its peacekeeping and peacebuilding policies with those of France and the broader Western liberal approach. Beijing maintained a somewhat ambiguous stance regarding the initial announcement of Opération Serval, expressing concerns that France might exploit the mission to establish a more enduring presence in the Sahel region, and if it proceeded to pacify Mali unilaterally, it could find itself in a sticky situation.¹⁵⁹

However, the Chinese government's initial response to the French deployment of forces was measured and not overtly critical. In the first official statement from the Chinese Foreign Ministry after the commencement of operations, the issue of France's role was not directly addressed. Instead, the spokesperson denounced attacks by rebel forces, affirmed Chinese support for the Malian government, and advocated for an "Africa-led" intervention mission, aligning with Beijing's preference for local actors to address crises when possible.¹⁶⁰

Furthermore, according to several China-based Africa analysts France's intervention in Mali bolstered its diplomatic standing considerably in relation to both China and the United States, particularly as the Obama administration opted not to deploy forces to Mali. In her 2013 editorial for the *Global Times*, a daily tabloid under the auspices of the Chinese Communist Party's flagship newspaper, He Wenping argued that the Hollande government's decision to intervene not only risked a situation akin to the U.S. experience in Afghanistan but also opened the door to the "legalization of a new interventionism in Africa," a development unwelcome in Beijing's perspective.

She also highlighted that "France's involvement in Mali is still a risky business," evoking memories of the "African gendarmerie."¹⁵² Another editorial from that same year suggested that the West was pursuing a more robust strategic presence in Africa and hinted at possible economic motives for France's intervention in Mali. The article concluded that, given the circumstances, the Chinese government should refrain from sending troops or financial support to Mali, a recommendation that Beijing ultimately did not heed.¹⁶¹ By choosing to participate in MINUSMA, as Lanteigne points out, China provides not only a counterbalance to the presence of French and other Western personnel engaged¹⁶², but it has also allowed Beijing to address the growing global concerns about China's African diplomacy being solely based on resource extraction, including those of then-US President Barack Obama, suggesting that China was "free riding" on American and Western-led military operations.¹⁶³

Unlike in other African regions where Chinese peacekeeping personnel were involved, particularly in Sudan and South Sudan, Mali lacked a resource base that Chinese firms were actively seeking to co-develop. President Xi Jinping's address to the UN General Assembly in 2015 underscored this stance, as he pledged a commitment of \$100 million in financial assistance for the establishment of an African Union standby force, aimed at bolstering crisis response capabilities across the continent.¹⁶⁴ This commitment conveyed a message of holistic diplomacy and genuine interest in advancing security and stability in African nations, extending beyond mere economic considerations. Simultaneously, it contributed to enhancing Beijing's reputation by addressing criticisms of not being a responsible global power.¹⁶⁵

¹⁵⁶ Carozza (2021), p. 15

¹⁵⁷ Fung (2016), p. 417

¹⁵⁸ Zhongming (2014)

¹⁵⁹ Yun (2013)

¹⁶⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (January 2013) ¹⁵² He (2013)

¹⁶¹ Li and Jin (2013)

¹⁶² Lanteigne (2019), p. 646

¹⁶³ Feng (2014)

¹⁶⁴ Fung (2019), p. 522

¹⁶⁵ Fung (2016), p. 417

Chapter 2 China's Content Contestation:

An alternative agenda for peacebuilding?

2.1 Contesting the Universality of Liberal Democracy

Whereas its evolving role as a peacekeeper, highlighted by a strategic reinterpretation of the principle of non-interference, demonstrates China's openness to the normative underpinnings of liberal peace and thus generally abstaining from validity contestation. However, this chapter will demonstrate how China's developmental peace approach more actively engages in content by introducing a distinctive element into the peacebuilding agenda through advocating for the democratization of the international system.¹⁶⁶

This perspective asserts that reforms at the international level are imperative for achieving domestic peace, as the current hegemonic and exclusive nature of the international system often contributes to conflicts and impedes the development of fragile states.¹⁶⁷ In his speech at the 60th Anniversary of the Formation of Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence in 2014, President Xi Jinping emphasized the right of all countries to participate equally in international and regional security affairs, highlighting the shared responsibility to maintain security globally and in various regions.¹⁶⁸ Evidently, that same year the Chinese Embassy in Mali website stated, "China is ready to work hand in hand with all countries to safeguard world peace".¹⁶⁹

The call for international system democratization carries both material and normative implications, aiming to broaden the representation and participation of developing countries, including China, in existing international institutions.¹⁷⁰ Simultaneously, it underscores a preference for cultural diversity over the universality of liberal democracy.¹⁷¹ Unlike the West's inclination towards a liberal model centred on democratization and marketization, China's policy, guided by the developmental peace idea, prioritises national ownership and sovereignty as crucial elements in promoting stability in regions emerging from internal conflict and war.¹⁷² This commitment is evident in both China's practical involvement in peacekeeping and reconstruction in Mali and its corresponding policy discourse at international forums.

In its peacekeeping role, China upholds sovereignty and non-intervention principles but actively engages in peace operations led by both international and regional organisations. Besides having been a major financial contributor to MINUSMA, having sent 9 contingents of Chinese peacekeepers and providing over 3500 personnel since 2013 and contributing to 15% of the total expenditure in 2022,¹⁷³ the Chinese government has also provided training and equipment to the Malian military, including sending military experts to train troops and providing armoured vehicles and helicopters.¹⁷⁴ Furthermore, China has provided financial and logistical support to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) led mediation in the Malian crisis (see 3.2 on the practical application China's "incentivizing mediation" approach).

While these practical multilateral engagements demonstrate China's commitment to strengthen the ability of a developing country like Mali to address internal security threats and maintain broader regional stability, this not necessarily persuasive in terms of demonstrating the advancement of content contestation against the liberal peace. A stronger case can be made when considering for example the remarks of China's Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador Zhang Jun at the UN Security Council Briefing on MINUSMA in 2012:

"China supports ECOWAS in its continued good offices and mediating efforts based on respect for Mali's sovereignty and ownership. The international community must remain patient, provide more support and encouragement for Mali's political transition, and take practical steps to help Mali tackle any difficulties that may arise in the electoral preparations and other areas."¹⁷⁵

This focus on practical and context-specific support suggests a preference for tailoring interventions to the specific needs and challenges at stake. In contrast, the West's liberal peace intervention policy often seek specific political and institutional reforms for the purpose of immediate democratisation and institution-building in post-conflict environment¹⁷⁶. In essence, this illustrates a dual commitment to exist within China's developmental peace: on the

¹⁶⁶ Yuan (2022), p. 1807

¹⁶⁷ He (2017)

¹⁶⁸ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China (28 June 2014)

¹⁶⁹ Zhongming (January 17, 2014)

¹⁷⁰ Yuan (2022), p. 1807

¹⁷¹ Permanent Mission of China to the UN (2004); Foot (2020)

¹⁷² Xuejun (2014), p. 6-7

¹⁷³ United Nations Secretariat (31 July 2023)

¹⁷⁴ The Defense Post (27 April 2023)

¹⁷⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (4 December 2012)

¹⁷⁶ Xuejun (2014), p 6

one hand a dedication to multilateralism as a guiding principle; on the other hand, a strong emphasis on a bottom up approach over externally imposed broad-based institutional reforms.

The speeches of China's ambassador to Mali, further exemplify such a principled yet pragmatic approach to conflict resolution. In 2019, Zhi Liying for example underscores China's commitment to historical principles rooted in Confucian philosophy, emphasizing peace, equality, respect, sovereignty, and non-interference in its bilateral relations with Mali. Hereby the ambassador specifically advocates against trends of selfishness and unilateralism, championing values of solidarity, free trade, and multilateralism aligned with the UN.¹⁷⁷

Another speech highlights the 20th anniversary of the Sino-African partnership, emphasizing collaboration with Third World countries, showcasing China's inclusive and multilateral approach. Additionally, he emphasizes China's contribution to peace and security, particularly in Mali, through joint efforts with Sahel countries and support for the G5 Sahel countries in anti-terrorist endeavours.¹⁷⁰ The emphasis hereby on mobilization for national unity, sovereignty, and peace underscores China's preference for a bottom-up approach, aligning interventions with regional needs. China's commitment to multilateralism is further demonstrated in his mention of collaborations with MINUSMA, Europe, and the United States.¹⁷⁸

The rhetoric that is reflected in China's bilateral relations with Mali aligns with the Global Security Initiative proposed by President Xi Jinping at the 2022 Boao Forum for Asia, encompassing (1) a comprehensive and cooperative security approach; (2) respect for sovereignty; (3) adherence to the UN Charter, (4) consideration of countries' security concerns; (5) peaceful conflict resolution through dialogue; and (6) integrated security across traditional and non-traditional domains.¹⁷⁹ During his visit to Malian Minister of Foreign Affairs last year, Ambassador Chen Zhihong pointed out how these "six insistences" clearly answered the era of "what kind of security concept does the world need and how can countries achieve common security?".¹⁸⁰

While pursuing multilateralism to tackle domestic and broader regional security, China's approach to peacebuilding in Mali is thus consistent with its preference for cultural diversity over liberal democracy.¹⁷⁴ In fact, China's commitment to this policy discourse continues even after when in June of this year Mali's ruling junta requested MINUSMA to leave "without delay"¹⁷⁵. In response, Chinese UN Ambassador Zhang Jun called on the global community to address Mali's practical challenges while respecting the sovereignty and leadership of the nations involved.

In his explanation of vote to the UN Security Council draft resolution on the withdrawal of MINUSMA, he argued "historical experience has proven that peacekeeping operations must follow the basic principles developed in practice of a long period of time, in particular the principle of consent of the countries concerned".¹⁸¹ Zhang Jun concluded his statement that China will remain dedicated to supporting Mali's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national security through multilateral and bilateral channels for peaceful development.¹⁸²

Similarly, Dai Bing, China's deputy permanent representative to the UN, stressed that "the international community should not stand aside and do nothing with regard to the efforts by Mali and the countries in the region to counter terrorism and maintain stability, but, instead, it should continue to provide supporting equipment, logistics and funding and enhance the capacity of the Malian authorities and protect civilians."¹⁸³ Dai Bing also commended international humanitarian organizations and significant donors to uphold the level of aid to continue support for Mali and other West African and Sahel countries without imposing any political conditions on their assistance.¹⁸⁴ These calls for continued support in Mali's peace and security landscape, even though the UN's pull-out is ought to be finalised by the end of this year, does not only demonstrate China's commitment to international cooperation but also buys the conviction that hegemonic nature of the current international system should broaden the representation and participation of developing countries.

2.2 Contesting the Neo-liberal Elements of Peacebuilding

In addition to advocating for the democratization of the international system, China's developmental peace adopts an alternative sequencing of established peacebuilding elements.¹⁸⁵ This is evident in its preference for assisting Mali in socio-economic development, following the "infrastructure-constructing model", as coined by Xuejun. This

¹⁷⁷ Liying (28 September 2019) ¹⁷⁰

Liying (23 February 2020)

¹⁷⁸ Liying (27 February 2020)

¹⁷⁹ Lina Ying et al (2023), p. 8

¹⁸⁰ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Mali (26 April 2022)

¹⁷⁴ Xuejun (2014), p 7 ¹⁷⁵ Li Jiayao (2023)

¹⁸¹ Xinhua (1 July 2023)

¹⁸² Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN (30 June 2023)

¹⁸³ Xinhua (31 August 2023)

¹⁸⁴ UN Security Council (28 August 2023)

¹⁸⁵ Yuan (2022), p. 1808

model allocates significant political and economic resources to essential infrastructure like roads, bridges, and hospitals, while comparatively fewer resources are directed toward institution-building and advocating for hasty democratic elections.¹⁸⁶

Accordingly, Chinese diplomats in Mali emphasize that while investments in infrastructure and business play a pivotal role in establishing and sustaining lasting peace¹⁸⁷, economic devastation perpetuates conflict, as evident in the destructive impact of the crisis on Mali's economy: The escalation of unemployment and reduced revenues provides fertile ground for armed groups, either through blackmailing or luring unemployed youth.¹⁸⁸ The resulting low employment exacerbates the conflict by fostering drug trafficking and other illicit trade activities. The government's inability to address youth unemployment and implement essential economic reforms becomes a central grievance among its opponents.¹⁸⁹

It is therefore not surprising that during the 64th anniversary of the founding of the PRC (2013), Cao Zhongming, the then Chinese ambassador operating in Bamako, addressed: "In the future, China will continue to support Malian efforts for lasting peace, territorial integrity, economic recovery and reconstruction, in order to realize the Malian dream, marked by the stability of the country, the social development and national reconciliation."¹⁹⁰ A year hereafter, the ambassador's vow is further outlined in a publication posted by the official website of the Chinese embassy: "China intends to expand its cooperation in six areas, including industry, finance, poverty alleviation, environmental protection, cultural and people-to-people exchanges as well as maintaining peace and security. Rapid growth and a bright future of China's economy will bring significant opportunities to Mali."¹⁹¹

While the association of peace and security with development is not unique to the Chinese perspective, China's approach, particularly evident in Mali, distinctively reconceptualizes the pursuit of development as a means of ensuring security, rather than merely a consequence thereof.¹⁹² This policy discourse not only becomes evident from the continuity of Chinese investments in the Malian construction sector, even after the intrastate armed conflicts in Mali in 2012¹⁹³ (see 3.1 for project specific details) but is also reiterated in numerous official declarations, of which I offer some examples below.

During a 2016 reception held in Bamako, Chinese and Malian officials celebrated the tangible progress made in Mali since the signing of the peace and reconciliation agreement in 2014.¹⁹⁴ Notably citing a 6% economic growth rate in 2015 with the IMF forecasting a further growth of 5%, ambassador Lu Huiying expressed: "All of this is very encouraging. We hope that all Malian parties continue to make efforts so that the next National Reconciliation Conference is crowned with success to restore sustainable peace, which is the guarantee of development, and development is the key to all problems."¹⁹⁵ Again, the link is drawn here between economic development and the ongoing peace and reconciliation process, suggesting a strategic interplay, portraying development as a pivotal element in the broader framework of peace and stability. The ambassador continues to emphasize this in concluding his speech: "China firmly supports the Malian government in its efforts to safeguard territorial integrity and national unity of Mali and for the reconstruction and economic recovery of Mali"¹⁹⁶

Building upon Huiying's resolute stance on the integral connectedness of development, security, and overall national resilience, Chinese UN ambassador Dai Bing argued in his plea during this year's UN Security Council briefing to support Mali in various developmental projects, including agriculture, infrastructure, education, and housing.¹⁹⁷ Hereby Dai Bing particularly expressed the following concern:

"A large number of Malian youths are caught up in conflict, violence and poverty. It is important to increase policy support and investment in this sector of the population. Last December saw the completion of phase two of Kabala Campus of The University of Bamako, which is the largest educational infrastructure project built with Chinese aid in West Africa."¹⁹⁸

The specific focus put here on the younger generation underscores again the recognition that addressing socioeconomic issues is vital for long-term stability. Furthermore, China contends that democratic institution-

¹⁸⁶ Xuejun (2014), page 7

¹⁸⁷ Zhu (2019)

¹⁸⁸ Assanova et al (2019)

¹⁸⁹ Bleck et al (2016); Thiam (2015)

¹⁹⁰ Zhongming (26 September 2013)

¹⁹¹ Huiying (3 October 2015)

¹⁹² Benabdallah and Large (2023), p. 217

¹⁹³ Hodzi (2019), pp. 147-8

¹⁹⁴ PA-X, Peace Agreement Access Tool (24 July 2014)

¹⁹⁵ Huiying (30 September 2016)

¹⁹⁶ Huiying (30 September 2016)

¹⁹⁷ Permanent Mission of China to the UN (27 January 2023)

¹⁹⁸ Permanent Mission of China to the UN (27 January 2023)

building necessitates specific socio-economic conditions. A researcher at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences argues that rapid democratization in immature post-conflict environments is deemed futile and may even contradict the essence of liberal peace, a sentiment echoed in many official statements from China.¹⁹⁹ While China does not explicitly reject the establishment of democratic institutions in the Mali context, it maintains ambiguity regarding the specific conditions for implementing such political initiatives.²⁰⁰

In an interview conducted by the Malian newspaper *Le Républicain* just after the crisis broke out in 2012, Chinese Ambassador Cao Zhongming underscores China's cautious stance toward Mali's political challenges, emphasizing support for Mali's territorial integrity and citing parallels with China's own reunification concerns. Although he stresses the need for constitutional order, transparent elections, and political stability in Mali, simultaneously, regarding the demand for a government of national unity, the ambassador reiterates China's commitment to non-interference and respect for the choices of the Malian people. Addressing the suspension of cooperation by Western powers, Zhongming clarifies that China is resuming projects during the transition period, emphasizing stability and security as prerequisites²⁰¹

In the run-up to as well as after China's deployment of peacekeepers to MINUSMA in 2013, the Chinese embassy continues to hold such a stance. By highlighting the smooth running of the presidential election and the imminent inauguration of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, Zhongming underscored the significance of a gradual and stable political transition in "a sovereign and respected Mali, outside as well as inside".²⁰² The mention of a "lasting stability" and a "beautiful dream" hereby aligns with the idea that a measured and sustainable approach to political evolution is essential for achieving the envisioned prosperity.²⁰³

This cautious, measured optimistic attitude perhaps explains why in January 2022, China blocked the United Nations Security Council from endorsing ECOWAS's proposed sanctions on Mali, following its military's proposal to remain in power for up to five years before holding elections²⁰⁴ Whereas during this year's UN Security Council briefing, China welcomed positive steps taken by Mali in initiating the constitutional process and establishing an inclusive National Transitional Council, it stressed the complexity of achieving political transition overnight, highlighting the need for maintaining unity and stability throughout the process.²⁰⁵

¹⁹⁹ Li (2019), p. 32

²⁰⁰ Yuan (2022), p. 1808

²⁰¹ Dao and Kounta (7 October 2012)

²⁰² Zhongming (23 August 2013)

²⁰³ Zhongming (23 August 2013)

²⁰⁴ Alzajcera (12 January 2022)

²⁰⁵ Permanent Mission of China to the UN (27 January 2023)

Chapter 3 China's Application Contestation:

A Domestically led Peacebuilding Process

3.1 Contesting Aid Conditionalities

Whereas the last chapter explored China's content contestation, its opposition to liberal peace is also evident from its emphasis on national ownership and rejection of externally formulated or imposed peacebuilding solutions (application contestation). In stark contrast to the local turn discourse, China's approach does not involve mere adjustments to externally formulated templates. Instead, it asserts that local actors, specifically domestic governments, should have the ultimate authority in deciding the peacebuilding agenda. In programmatic terms, China abstains from "educating or reforming natives" but opts for demonstrating success through demonstration, non-conditional aid, and small-scale skills transfer.²⁰⁶

During their fieldwork Benabdallah and Large found that three prominent development initiatives stand out within China's extensive projects in Mali.²⁰⁷ These include the Centre de Formation Professionnelle in Senou, the Centre Universitaire de Kabala²⁰⁸, and the Centre Pilote Agricole in Baguineda.²⁰⁹ These projects share significant potential for generating employment, facilitating skills transfer, and enhancing living conditions in Mali. Notably, they are all situated in or near the capital city. For instance, close to the airport in Bamako, the newly constructed Vocational Training Centre, financed by the Chinese government, was finished in 2018, poised to provide young Malians with technical skills for the job market.²¹⁰ Despite its fundamental goal of equipping youth with employable skills to elevate socioeconomic conditions, the centre has remained unused for almost two years.²¹¹

People-to-people exchange initiatives and scholarship programs represent a distinctive feature of Chinese foreign policy in Africa and a significant aspect of China-Mali bilateral relations. Under the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) funding, the scope of Sino-Mali cooperation has broadened, incorporating more cultural and educational exchanges. Annually, China orchestrates approximately 80 seminars for Malians and supports 300 professionalization training programs. Notably, by September 2017, 2,536 Malians had taken part in FOCAC organized professionalization trainings in China.²¹²

Another noteworthy facet of these exchanges is the introduction of a series of vocational training workshops for artisanal skills, as announced by Xi Jinping during the 2018 FOCAC. Termed Luban Workshops, these initiatives aim "to provide vocational training for young Africans."²¹³ Mali's inaugural Luban workshop commenced on December 20, 2019, in the form of an Atelier de Medecine Traditionelle Chinoise situated at the Chinese-funded campus of Kabala University.²¹⁴

Additional Chinese-led development initiatives targeting the enhancement of living conditions involve the initiation of a school construction program in Malian rural regions of Mopti, Sikasso, and Kirina, primarily powered by solar energy. Another project, originating after the 2015 FOCAC, collaborates with StarTimes, a Chinese electronics and media company in Sub-Saharan Africa, to link 200 villages to satellite TV.²¹⁵ In this partnership, StarTimes facilitates selected villages' access to satellite TV, offering world news and educational programs while concurrently promoting Chinese television channels through its satellite offerings.²¹⁶

Integrating cultural initiatives with aid is a recurring theme in various China-backed cultural exchange programs, as exemplified by the inaugural China-Mali Spring Festival Evening Gala in January 2019 at the Centre International De Conférences De Bamako.²¹⁷ China, contributing to its construction and more recent renovation, hosted the event. The gala, attended by the then-President Keita, featured Chinese participants from diverse groups in Mali, including medical teams, personnel from the Confucius Institute in Bamako, and Chinese peacekeepers who

²⁰⁶ Yuan (2022), p. 1804-1805

²⁰⁷ Benabdallah and Large (2020), pp. 8-9

²⁰⁸ See AidData, 'Chinese Government provides RMB 402 million grant for Phase 1 of Kabala Campus of Bamako University Project' <https://www.aiddata.org/data/aiddatas-global-chinese-development-finance-dataset-version-3-0>

²⁰⁹ The Center for West African Studies of University of Electronic Science and Technology of China (11 September 2021)

²¹⁰ Yuanyuan (15 May 2023)

²¹¹ Benabdallah and Large (2020), pp. 8-9

²¹² Aiping and Zhan (2018)

²¹³ Xinhua (3 September 2018); Secretariat of the Chinese Follow-up Committee of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation. "5.5.2 To promote employment and capacity-building, China will continue to carry out poverty alleviation experience sharing and small-and-micro livelihoods projects for young people in African countries, so that more young Africans will be a part of China-Africa cooperation. Ten Luban Workshops will be set up in Africa to provide vocational training for young Africans. China will support opening of a China-Africa innovation cooperation center to promote youth innovation and entrepreneurship." (12 September 2018): http://www.focac.org/eng/zywx_1/zywj/201809/t20180912_7933578.htm

²¹⁴ Benabdallah and Large (2020), p. 9

²¹⁵ China Daily (26 October 2021)

²¹⁶ Benabdallah and Large (2020), p. 9

²¹⁷ Liying (15 November 2019)

presented a dance called "The Sword of Peace."²¹⁸ The Confucius Institute, situated at l'Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako in Badalabougou, serves as another significant player at the intersection of cultural exchanges and aid.²¹⁹

Fieldwork observations reveal that enrolled students at the institute engage in classes on Chinese language, China's history, introduction to China, and learn about Chinese culture through dance, acting, and martial arts activities.²²⁰ Furthermore, the institute aids in the selection of Chinese government-sponsored scholarships for Malian students by hosting information sessions about studying in China. Despite its relatively recent establishment in 2018, the Confucius Institute has garnered substantial interest from young Malians keen on exploring funding opportunities for studying in China.²²¹ The lengthy queues and bustling classrooms, teeming with students eager to pursue studies at Chinese universities²²², as observed by Benabdallah and Large, further exemplify the favourable reception of China's development initiatives and cultural exchanges in Mali.

Young Malians harbour aspirations of studying in China or becoming translators for Chinese companies in Mali after learning Chinese at the Confucius Institute. The 2014/2015 Afro barometer surveys provide empirical support for this positive perception, revealing favourable attitudes toward China's role in Mali from an economic standpoint.²²³ The survey disclosed that an overwhelming 92 percent of Malians viewed China's influence positively, with an additional 88 percent expressing approving sentiments with regards to its development assistance.²²⁴ Furthermore, interviews conducted by Coning and Osland suggest that China's approach in Mali is lauded for its hardworking, non-intrusive, and culturally sensitive nature, standing in contrast to perceived interference and cultural conflicts associated with Western engagement.²²⁵

Professor Salif Diallo, an international relations expert based in Bamako, adds to this that there is historical desire among Africans for the transfer of technological skills to be a pivotal aspect of Sino-Malian and Sino-African relations. Instead of solely focusing on export activities, economic operators could negotiate and establish partnerships with Chinese entrepreneurs, exemplifying this with the SUKALA (Sino-Malian sugar factory) as a successful industrial collaboration.²²⁶ This resonates with an informal survey in Bamako, where participants expressed positive sentiments about China's infrastructure projects,²²⁷ including sports stadiums in Bougouni and San, the Mali Hospital, the third bridge in Bamako, and industrial units Comatex and Sukala, co-financed and constructed by both countries. As noted by the official Chinese Embassy website, these projects contribute to increased tax revenues, job creation, and enhanced autonomy for Mali.²²⁸

Furthermore, in 2014 diplomat Cao Zhongming announced the imminent commencement of work on the BamakoSégou Road and emphasized China's active promotion of issues related to malaria drug supply and financing largescale projects through credit and aid. He thereby asserted that the Chinese side aligns itself with Malian concerns and is committed to advancing priority projects proposed by the sitting government.²²⁹ Malian PM Moussa Mara commended the Chinese authorities for their notable efforts in this direction, emphasizing initiatives such as training programs for managers, technicians, and engineers, along with research programs aimed at boosting agricultural production.²³⁰ These favourable perceptions align with China's multifaceted approach and rejection of externally imposed frameworks, showcasing a coherent strategy that addresses diverse aspects of development in partnership with the host country.

David Dembélé, an investigative journalist based in Bamako, further exemplifies China's context-specific approach in his article 'The Chinese company transforming the face of Mali'.²²⁶ COVEC-Mali, recognized as a leading construction company in Mali, has played a significant role in the country's development, contributing to the construction of high-quality road, socio-sanitary, and sporting infrastructures, Dembélé argues. Noteworthy projects include the 26-Mars stadium in Bamako (2002), the Palais des Sports in ACI-2000, and various roads across Bamako and the country's interior. What distinguishes its approach is the significant employment it generates for the local population, particularly Malian youth. On average, approximately 80% of the workforce involved in its projects

²¹⁸ Liying (15 November 2019)

²¹⁹ Maliweb (5 July 2018)

²²⁰ Benabdallah and Large (2020), p. 9

²²¹ From China's Ambassador to Mali's twitter account, <https://twitter.com/LiyingZHU1/status/1206991411465326593/photo/2>.

²²² Benabdallah and Large (2023), p.219

²²³ Bleck and Michelitch (2015)

²²⁴ According to Diakon and Rösenthaler (2017) there is a prevailing acknowledgment of China's infrastructure initiatives and the accessibility of reasonably priced consumer goods in Mali. However, they note that alongside this appreciation, there exists a considerable level of scepticism, ranging from uneasy sentiments to outright criticism of China's overarching 'win-win' narrative.

²²⁵ Coning and Osland (2020), pp. 9-10

²²⁶ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Mali (10 May 2014)

²²⁷ Indeed, the Afrobarometer survey reveals a certain level of ambivalence and even reluctance towards China among the Malian population (see: Bleck and Michelitch (2015))

²²⁸ Dembélé (11 June 2014)

²²⁹ Dembélé (11 June 2014)

²³⁰ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Mali (10 May 2014)²²⁶
Dembélé (8 July 2014)

consists of Malian workers, supervised by Chinese engineers and technicians.²³¹ This employment strategy demonstrates the Chinese commitment to skills transfer and local capacity building.

Building on the tangible impact of companies like COVEC-Mali, China's broader aid philosophy, marked by nonconditional assistance, establishes a distinct narrative that positions China as morally superior to Western aid programs, which often come with governance and human rights prerequisites.²³² This "South-South cooperation" approach, emphasizing equal partnerships over hierarchical donor–recipient relationships²³³, aligns seamlessly with China's broader objective of garnering solidarity and support from developing countries, particularly those grappling with conflict.

After Mali's accession to the BRI²³⁴ in 2019, Ambassador Liying exemplified China's commitment to this philosophy, citing specific projects such as "Digital Mali," the Agricultural Pilot Centre, "solar energy" villages, and infrastructure donations.²³⁵ Reflecting on historical projects in tea, sugar, and textiles, Liying envisions a future that promotes "Made in Mali" and "Made in Africa,"²³⁶ including the establishment of a potential special economic zone in Sikasso. The ambassador's optimism in addressing Mali's economic needs for mutual benefit²³⁷, mirrors China's commitment to local manufacturing and industrial cooperation, pursuing job creation and value addition through tailored "win-win cooperation".²³⁸

3.2 Contesting Intrusive and Coercive Policy Tools

In applying its facilitative role and commitment to locally led peace solutions, China's application contestation also finds a concrete illustration in its distinctive approach to conflict management, specifically in its support for Mali's counterterrorism efforts. In response to the March 2012 crisis, marked by a coup that toppled the government, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) took the lead in negotiations to resolve the Malian conflict.²³⁹ Consequently, Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei called on all relevant parties to resolve the crisis through dialogue and negotiations, emphasizing the importance of restoring normal constitutional order and social stability in Mali promptly.²³⁶

Lei particularly expressed appreciation of the efforts of the African Union, ECOWAS, and neighbouring countries in mediating the Mali issue²⁴⁰, showcasing China's endorsement of regional-led initiatives. China's commitment to finding diplomatic solutions through consensus points was further corroborated at the UN Security Council Briefing on MINUSMA later that year:

"The international community should support the parties in Mali in seizing the opportunity of the political transition, resolving their differences through dialogue, and ensuring the smooth holding of general elections, so as to lay a solid foundation for durable stability in Mali," Ambassador Zhang Jun said.²⁴¹

In the period leading up to October 2012, ECOWAS organized more than 30 meetings at various levels – e.g. heads of State and government, ministerial and technical - to formulate a framework to restore constitutional order and political stability in the beleaguered country.²³⁹ The meetings culminated into the initiation of a high-level mediation team under the auspices of President Blaise Compaore, the former president of Burkina Faso with an immediate mandate to first restore constitutional order in Mali.²⁴² Whereas Hodzi argues that China's backing of ECOWAS mediation efforts was primarily verbal and lacked substantive contributions²⁴³, - a passive stance that aligns with China's non-interference policy, as Shinn adds - I consider an abundance of empirical works to reveal otherwise.

In fact, African scholars Nashipai and Kiprof claim China's developmental peace approach has demonstrated active financial and logistical support contributions to Mali's peace initiatives.²⁴⁴ The – notably US-based - John L. Thornton China Centre validates this statement, claiming that in 2013 the Chinese government extended a financial aid package of \$1 million to the African Union (AU) to bolster its mediation and coordination endeavours in

²³¹ Dembélé (8 July 2014)

²³² Givens (2011)

²³³ Yuan (2022), p. 1809

²³⁴ See: <https://www.oboreurope.com/en/mali-officially-bri/>

²³⁵ Liying (28 September 2019)

²³⁶ Liying (23 February 2020)

²³⁷ Liying (28 September 2019)

²³⁸ Liying (23 February 2020)

²³⁹ BBC News (14 May 2012) ²³⁶

Xinhua (28 March 2012)

²⁴⁰ Xinhua (28 March 2012)

²⁴¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (4 December 2012) ²³⁹ Cilliers & Handy (2013)

²⁴² ECOWAS Commission (2012)

²⁴³ Hodzi (2019), p. 156

²⁴⁴ Nashipai and Kiprof (2014), p. 11

addressing the Mali conflict.²⁴⁵ Subsequently, in 2016, China collaborated with African support to establish the UN Peace and Development Trust Fund, making a substantial contribution of \$200 million over a decade to supporting initiatives related to peacekeeping security, rapid response, and conflict prevention and mediation.²⁴⁶

Additionally, at the 2017 Abuja Commission, President de Souza of ECOWAS highlighted the potential benefits of Chinese assistance in equipment and logistics to bolster regional initiatives for lasting peace and security, specifically mentioning Mali as a regional flashpoint. His thanking of Ambassador Pingjian Zhou for presenting a \$200,000 capacity-building grant asserts that China's involvement has indeed not been limited to diplomatic efforts but extends to practical support.²⁴⁷

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that China participated in the UN Security Council's resolution aimed at preparing for interventions against Islamic insurgents in Mali.²⁴⁸ When questioned in 2012 about ECOWAS's insistence that the military relinquish power, facing potential sanctions like border closures, frozen central bank accounts, and military intervention, Lei answered: "China supports the ECOWAS-led peaceful mediation for the Malian crisis. We hope parties concerned in Mali will establish a dialogue channel with the ECOWAS as soon as possible to seek an end to the crisis through negotiation and avoid confrontation as well as serious impact on people's life."²⁴⁹ This resonates with China's traditional opposition towards sanctions and similar restrictive measures, viewing them as unwarranted interference in the domestic affairs of other countries.

Instead, as the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform argues, China advocates for diplomatic persuasion and compromise and consistently emphasizes the need for local solutions to local problems, highlighting the importance of regional organizations in leading peace initiatives.²⁵⁰ For instance, in the case of Mali, China has been, as Ambassador Wu Haitao's stated at the Security Council Briefing on Mali in 2017, advocating for "African solutions to African issues"²⁵¹ through its support for the continued mediation endeavours led by the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States, reinforcing China's commitment to incentivizing regional mediation and building mutual trust.²⁵² In contrast to the liberal peace approach to conflict management which often appertains to intrusive and coercive policy tools²⁵³, China's developmental peace approach thus asserts the primary responsibility for resolving conflicts lies with those directly affected, with external forces playing a secondary role at best.²⁵⁴

A report from the European Parliamentary Research Service further expands on this aspect of China's active engagement in application contestation. In shedding light on how China's response to the August 2020 coup in Mali diverged from the AU-Peace and Security Council (PSC), France, the US, and the EU, the report underscores the way China's "softer diplomatic approach" served to facilitate negotiations without rigid conditions or timelines as opposed to the West's more coercive and interventionist approach that endorsed ECOWAS' decision to impose additional strict sanctions.²⁵⁵ This aligns with Hirono's "incentivizing mediation" concept, wherein China prioritizes bringing conflicting parties to the table and encourages dialogue as the primary means of conflict resolution.²⁵⁶

More recent reflections of this commitment to employing non-coercive methods in conflict management especially become evident in analysing China's statements during this year's UN Security Council meetings. For example, in April, ambassador Zhang specifically promoted Mali's agreement for peace and reconciliation resulting from the Algiers process, thereby supporting Algerian-led mediation, and advocating for dialogue among conflicting parties while respecting Mali's sovereignty.²⁵⁷ A few months later the ambassador once again underscored how while China had been actively taking part in MINUSMA, it was unique in providing logistical and technical assistance without dictating and providing constructive support to Mali's political transition. The commendation of Mali's counterterrorism efforts and the reduction in civilian casualties indicates China's acknowledgment of local efforts in addressing security challenges. Hereby, the ambassador's constant insistence on factual reporting on human rights issues, rejecting their politicization, aligns with China's stance against imposing external norms.²⁵⁸

²⁴⁵ Sun (14 April 2014)

²⁴⁶ Nantulya (23 January 2023)

²⁴⁷ ECOWAS (10 November 2017)

²⁴⁸ Nashipai and Kiprof (2014), p. 11

²⁴⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (30 March 2012)

²⁵⁰ Mariani (2022)

²⁵¹ Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN (6 April 2017)

²⁵² Xinhua News Agency (30 October 2021)

²⁵³ Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013)

²⁵⁴ Mariani (2022)

²⁵⁵ Bakare (15 November 2023)

²⁵⁶ Pichon and Betant-Rasmussen (June 2021)

²⁵⁷ Zhuo (13 April 2023)

²⁵⁸ United Nations Press (16 June 2023)²⁵⁷

Nashipai and Kiprof (2014), p 13

Conclusion

To conclude, this thesis asserts that China's developmental peace presents a compelling alternative paradigm for sustainable peacebuilding that deserves a non-partial, nuanced analysis and comprehensive understanding. Hereby, using the case of the ongoing conflict in Mali, the systematic exploring of China's validity, content and application contestation against the liberal peace has generated valuable data to address the real, not just assumed, politics connecting security and development.

Firstly, delving into the Sino-Mali relationship, established in the 1960s, marked by tangible projects and financial assistance, underscored Mali's perception of China as a benevolent development partner, distinct from Western counterparts. Hereafter a historical transformation in their partnership is unveiled, particularly with China's departure from traditional non-intervention principles during the 2012 crisis. Although actively engaging in Mali's security landscape, providing military aid, and participating in UN peacekeeping, China does not adhere to the established liberal peace norms that strictly separate intervention from sovereign affairs. Coupled with the recognition of the emerging nexus between poverty and security and focus on regime stability as opposed to the French intervention, China's validity contestation prompts a reconsideration of the purpose and scope of external interventions, offering valuable insights into the realpolitik dynamics shaping the global landscape.

Secondly, the analysis of content contestation has revealed China's dedication to cultural diversity and its preference for a bottom-up approach tailored to regional needs, in contrast to the West's liberal peace intervention policy that often seeks immediate democratisation and institutional reforms. Despite Mali's request for MINUSMA to leave, China calls for addressing practical challenges while respecting sovereignty, displaying a commitment to international cooperation. Furthermore, China's alternative sequencing of peacebuilding elements in Mali emphasizes socioeconomic development over hasty democratic institution-building, arguing that economic stability is crucial for long-term peace. Chinese diplomats herewith stress the role of infrastructure projects in establishing lasting peace and address issues like unemployment and economic devastation that contribute to conflicts.

Thirdly, China's application contestation is evident in emphasizing national ownership and rejecting externally imposed peacebuilding solutions. Unlike the local turn discourse, China asserts that domestic governments should have the ultimate authority in determining the peacebuilding agenda. In programmatic terms, numerous development initiatives in Mali, including vocational training centres and cultural exchange programs, showcase China's commitment to providing non-conditional aid and skills transfer. China's collaboration with COVEC-Mali further positions China's context-specific approach, emphasizing local employment and aligning with its broader aid philosophy of non-conditional assistance, as morally superior to Western aid programs.

In conflict management, China's provision of financial and logistical support to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)-led mediation during the Malian crisis, demonstrates commitment to finding diplomatic solutions through consensus points, urging the international community to support Mali's political transition patiently. In essence, China's incentivizing mediation approach aligns with its overall rejection of coercive means and externally imposed solutions. It emphasizes a non-prescriptive, context-specific approach to conflict resolution, allowing the involved parties more autonomy in shaping the peace process. This approach reflects China's commitment to principles of national ownership and a belief in supporting countries' self-driven development, signifying a departure from Western paternalistic attitudes.

In essence, the Mali case has presented China as a "South-South cooperation" provider, which, in contrast to the local turn discourse, asserts the ultimate authority of local actors, particularly domestic governments, in shaping the peacebuilding agenda. Hereby, China's facilitative and non-coercive stance and supporting locally led peace solutions lobbied by regional organisations like the AU and ECOWAS, as well as the UN's peacekeeping mission, underscore its role as a responsible global actor committed to conflict resolution. This can be interpreted as an acknowledgment that the Mali crisis extends beyond the country itself, potentially affecting the entire Sahel region and thereby impacting its broader post-conflict government capabilities to ensuring long-term stability in the area.²⁵⁷

China's acknowledgment of the interconnected nature of regional security challenges the notion of narrow self-interest. Notably, China's engagement in Malian infrastructure projects such as the Bamako expressway and its promotion of youth innovation and entrepreneurship through Luban Workshops reflect a commitment to nonconditional assistance and shared economic benefits. These alternative narrative counters perceptions of debt-driven exploitation traditionally linked to colonial practices. Moreover, the case underscores that China's pragmatic and context-specific approach to peacebuilding in Mali transcends mere economic considerations, offering a nuanced perspective on neo-colonialism.

Similarly, accusations of human rights violations may be questioned in the Mali context, where China's involvement is marked by non-coercive methods and support for locally led peace solutions. The emphasis on respecting sovereign equality and cultural diversity suggests a departure from the Western-centric approach to human rights, prompting a reconsideration of the critiques. Hence rather than assessing the validity of these critiques perhaps it becomes more essential to re-evaluate the relevance of the accusations themselves and to what extent they adequately capture the real political dynamics on the ground.

In fact, the extensive focus of Western liberal scholars and policymakers on critiquing China's interests, risks alienating not just China, but also aid-receiving countries in the Global South. This attitude, centred on expecting conformity to Western norms and practices, may potentially hinder the collaboration necessary for sustainable peace outcomes. Instead, a more open-minded approach, embracing the need for a more inclusive and democratic international system that accommodates the perspectives and participation of developing nations, aligning with China's content norms, could redirect energy toward finding comprehensive and pan-global solutions. Shifting the narrative from a paternalistic focus on how China adheres to established norms to one that values cultural diversity, and 'win-win' cooperation could contribute to more pan-global and sustainable approach to peacebuilding.

While the corresponding policy discourse on peacebuilding in Mali since 2012 implies a degree of paternalism by presenting China as possessing superior knowledge of how such fragile states should develop economically²⁵⁹, Chinese officials and scholars acknowledge that the Chinese model may not be universally applicable. Pan Yaling, a researcher at Fudan University further corroborates this: "In the 1970s, China's development lagged that of some African countries. However, after more than 30 years of "development first" policy, China's development has been far ahead of African countries that followed the Western recipe of "security first"²⁶⁰. President Xi Jinping emphasizes that the Chinese model stems from the country's specific national circumstances and a prolonged process of exploration, experimentation, and modification.²⁶¹ Even in Africa, where China's influence is growing, Chinese scholars oppose coercive means, externally imposed solutions, and prescriptive models, advocating instead for a context-specific approach.²⁶²

In reflecting on such broader implications of China's developmental peace approach, it is pertinent to revisit the insightful words expressed by Liying during the closing ceremony of the 20th Bamako Forum. In concluding his speech, the Chinese Ambassador to Mali congratulated President Coulibaly for his "long-term effort and "long-term vision", and aptly quoted what Mr Xi Jinping has repeatedly said, "不忘初心，方得始终" – "It is only by remaining faithful to one's initial commitment that one can obtain one's final objective."²⁶³ This sentiment is also echoed in the Chinese proverb, "When people work together, mountains turn to gold."²⁶⁴ In the face of the global challenges of today, these words resonate, inviting reflection on the enduring Sino-Mali partnership and the potential for shared success regardless of the uncertainties that lay ahead.

In this context, China emerges as a materialist or realist actor, contrasting with the West's perceived stance of an arrogant idealist, while Mali appears pragmatic in its approach. The dynamics shaping the future of peace in Africa will be a nuanced interplay of these diverse external forces. Despite the challenges posed by Western hegemony, it remains a formidable task for China to fully replace the liberal peace thesis with the developmental peace concept in dominating conflict management. Nonetheless, it is foreseeable that the proportion of the development factor in Africa's peace and security landscape will likely rise, signifying a shifting landscape toward a more balanced and multifaceted approach.²⁶⁵

²⁵⁹ Suzuki (2011)

²⁶⁰ Yuan (2022), p. 1809; Yaling (2016), p. 47

²⁶¹ China Daily (2017)

²⁶² Wang and Liu (2013), p. 47

²⁶³ Liying (23 February 2020)

²⁶⁴ Dembélé (2014)

²⁶⁵ Xuejun (2014), p. 10

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