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China's Regional Forum Diplomacy in the Developing World: Socialisation and the 'Sinosphere'

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Abstract

This article examines Chinese-led regional forums in the developing world where the Chinese preponderance of economic power is self-evident, its financial largesse is readily utilised to sustain these endeavours, its bureaucracies are empowered to guide the conduct of institutional activities and its normative intentions and interests are given fullest expression.

This assessment of two such Chinese-instigated regional forums in the developing world suggests that despite the professed norms on 'political equality' and 'mutual benefit' and efforts to ensure the maintenance of Chinese interests over time, China's stance is increasingly contested by developing country member states. These challenges invariably take the form of struggles over the structuring of key administrative organs and the decision making process and as such are reflective of norms, interests and expectations held by developing country members. In other words although China holds a preponderance of structural power within these regional forums there is an ongoing process of socialisation – driven by developing country member states – aimed at reshaping China's behaviour to bring it more closely in line with the other members' interests.

China's contemporary rise to global prominence has been accompanied by a spirited debate on the necessity of integrating China into the Western norms which dominate the contemporary international system. The overwhelming emphasis of the scholarly literature on China and international institutions, following the lead of institutional theory, has focused on the prospects and possibilities of socialisation into prevailing norms and practices within the leading international institutions. The undercurrent of these studies is aimed towards producing an assessment of China's desire to endorse and sustain the Western dominated international order and the degree to which it seeks to reform (if not overturn) that order. Responding to the potentially alarmist implications of this debate, the Chinese government has sought to soothe Western concerns through employment of a 'peaceful rise' discourse and engaging more readily in pro-active multilateralism.¹ In the case of the latter, Beijing's actions in the UN Security Council around issues of intervention have undergone a distinctive shift on questions like Darfur and UN peacekeeping generally, albeit one which remains open to criticism as representing an episodic change rather than any sign of a systemic embrace of new norms on sovereignty.² Moreover, the establishment of the G20 has given

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¹ See for example, "White Paper on China's Peaceful Development", Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, September 6, 2011, accessed June 2, 2016, http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7126562.htm; Zheng Bijian, 'China's 'Peaceful Rise' to Great Power Status,' *Foreign Affairs* 84(5), (2005), pp. 18-24; Bonnie S. Glaser and Evan S. Medeiros, 'The Changing Ecology of Foreign Policy Making in China: The Ascension and Demise of the Theory of 'Peaceful Rise'', *The China Quarterly* 190, (2007), pp. 291-310.

² See Zhao Lei, 'Two Pillars of China's Global Peace Engagement Strategy: UN Peacekeeping and International Peacebuilding', *International Peacekeeping* 18(3), (2011), pp. 344-362; Allen Carlson, 'More Than Just Saying No: China's Evolving Approach to Sovereignty and Intervention since Tiananmen', Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross eds., *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Mathieu Duchâtel, Oliver Bräuner, and Zhou Hang, *Protecting China's Overseas Interests: The Slow Shift away from Non-interference*, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 41, (2014); Chin-Hao Huang, "From Strategic Adjustment to

further prominence to China's critical role in managing the fallout from the 2009 global financial crisis as well as quickened the tenor of discussions over Chinese intentions and even role in shaping the emerging international architecture.

Curiously, this literature on Chinese socialisation has ignored the raft of Chinese-instigated regional initiatives, from the Boao Forum for Asia to the China-Latin America and the Caribbean Forum, all of which have been established in the new century. These initiatives are inevitably constructed within the developing world where Beijing surfaces as an alternative to the 'Washington consensus' by proposing multilateral dialogue platforms within the south. Grounded on a different set of norms (non-conditionality, equality, mutual-benefit, non-interference in internal affairs), such regional forums in the developing world are supported by competing financial institutions and funds where China appears as the main shareholder, namely the China-Africa Development Fund, the \$40bn Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. In these China-led initiatives the Chinese preponderance of economic power is self-evident, its financial largesse is readily utilised to sustain these endeavours, its bureaucracies are empowered to guide the conduct of institutional activities and its normative intentions and interests are given fullest expression. Indeed, an examination of these regional arrangements reveals the preferred norms, interests and practices that feature in contemporary Chinese approaches to multilateralism more clearly than studies of Chinese actions within already established international institutions, where Beijing is more likely to conform to existing norms. This is at least as illuminating as the attempts to discern Chinese intentions and impact on the international system found in the existing literature on socialisation. Moreover, the creation of a network of regional forums and the growing institutionalisation of these is in keeping with a gradualist shift away from Beijing's firm adherence to the foreign policy principle of non-alignment to a looser interpretation that allows for a variety of engagements with groupings of states. These configurations foster a unique set of regional arrangements for China, providing it with opportunities to discuss matters of mutual concern internal to their ties with these states and allowing them to collectively consider common policy perspectives on a range of global topics, including the revision of global governance institutions. Alongside the recent initiatives such as of the establishment of the AIIB and the BRICS New Development Bank, China's regional forum diplomacy can be seen to be laying the foundation for a parallel international order, one in which Chinese interests hold sway.

This assessment of two such Chinese-instigated regional forums in the developing world suggests that despite the professed norms on 'political equality' and 'mutual benefit' and efforts to ensure the maintenance of Chinese interests over time, China's stance is increasingly contested by developing country member states. These challenges invariably take the form of struggles over the structuring of key administrative organs and the decision making process and as such are reflective of norms, interests and expectations held by developing country members. In other words, although China holds a preponderance of structural power within these regional forums there is an ongoing process of socialisation – driven in this case by developing country member states and expanding over time – aimed at reshaping China's behaviour to bring it more closely in line with the other members' interests. Understanding this process, the areas of contestation and degree of accommodation and resistance by Beijing, provides important insights into the viability of China's professed role as a global leader within the developing world intent on fostering a more equitable international order commensurate with its own interests.

Normative Learning? Understanding China's Peacekeeping Efforts in Africa," *Journal of International Peacekeeping* 17(3), (2013), pp 248-271; Chin-Hao Huang, 'Peacekeeping, Sovereignty, and Intervention' in *Chinese Foreign Policy*, ed. Emilian Kavalski (London: Ashgate, 2012).

This article explores the configuration that some of these Chinese regional forums in the developing world have taken, specifically the Forum for China-Africa Co-operation founded in 2000 and the Macau Forum founded in 2003. It then examines the structures and institutionalised practices developed within these particular organisations. Finally it concludes with an assessment as to the insights that they provide into China's conception of the international system in this period of transformation and the possibilities of impact of socialisation derived from non-Western sources.

International Institutions and the Quest to Socialise China

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The quest for modernisation initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 triggered China's gradual engagement with international institutions over the following three decades. This signalled a clear departure from Mao's rule marked by suspicion and sharp criticism towards western-dominated international governance system. Whilst this reality has done much for the improvement of China's image before the international community, Beijing's increasing military expenditure³ and economic ventures in non-traditional regions, raises concerns about the nature of China's rise and questions the depth of its commitment to the norms and institutions that frame the liberal international order.

This concern over the degree of China's 'socialization' into dominant normative underpinnings of the international system is embedded in most of the international relations literature on China since the 1990s. The socialisation debate has been evolving around a key question, whether China is likely to accommodate to dominant norms or will it try to shape the international system to its own image, which could be condensed in the classic realist dilemma: is China a *status quo* or a revisionist power?

Iain Johnston concluded in the early 2000s that it was not scientifically sustainable to classify China either as a revisionist state or as a *status quo* power, at least in the traditional sense.⁴ He argued that China had become by then too much integrated in the international community to be seen as a revisionist state, not only in terms of international organisations membership (clearly above the world's average and only slightly below U.S., Japanese and Indian records), but also in economic liberalism compliance.

Nonetheless, Johnston pointed out some particularities in China's behaviour that made it a fragile *status quo* power: its poor record on human rights and the evidence that it was more compliant within economic organisations than within security organizations. A sudden surge in revisionist behaviour could not be ruled out, particularly considering that China is now a much stronger (economic and military) player in the context of a world order in transition. Such assertive conduct could be triggered by an internal or external security crisis.

By stressing the role of the socialization process in changing China's self-concept and of its role in the international community, Johnston effectively endorses a more appeasement oriented approach towards China. Evidence from a number of studies looking at China's interaction with international organisations and the mechanism of economic competition⁵ seems to support this stance. Accession to WTO marked a turning point in strengthening the commitment to embrace market reforms and was followed by Beijing's efforts to globalise its newly consolidated state-owned enterprises.

³Joshua Shiffrin and Michael Beckley, 'Debating China's Rise and US Decline: Correspondence', *International Security* 13(37:3), (2012), pp. 172-181.

⁴ Alistair I. Johnston, 'Is China a Status quo power?' *International Security* 27(4), (2003), pp. 5-56.

⁵ Quddus Z. Snyder, 'The Illiberal Trading State: Liberal systemic theory and the mechanism of socialization', *Journal of Peace Research* 50(1), (2013), pp. 33-45; Margaret Pearson, 'The Major Multilateral Economic Institutions Engage China', in *Engaging China: the Management of a Rising Power*, ed. I. A. Johnston et al, (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 207-234; Ann Kent, *Beyond Compliance: China in International Organizations and Global Security* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2007); Alistair I. Johnston, *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980-2000*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2008)

Moreover, since the late 1990s Beijing has begun to relax its strict adherence to foreign policy principles that once defined its position within the international system, namely non-interference and non-alignment. Dogmatic stances have gradually given way to selective participation in multilateral activities like UN peacekeeping operations and formal engagement with a variety of regional bodies like the ASEAN Forum. All these trends suggest that China is moving inexorably towards conformity of practice and ultimately convergence with the established international order.

Whilst compliant with most international practices at present, China's leadership, however, is yet to conform to a global governance system fully dominated by Western norms. A number of high ranking Chinese officials have openly called for reforms of the financial international system in the aftermath of the global financial crisis.⁶ As China continues to grow and settles in its new role as a leading superpower, it is not inconceivable that Beijing would expect Chinese norms, values, and preferences to shape a new Sino-centric world order.

At this point in time, it is thus hard to determine to what degree China has in the course of its socialisation internalised the norms, principles and values that sustain the international system status quo. The reality seems to be multifaceted. As highlighted by David Shambaugh⁷, while increasingly engaged in international institutions and global issues, China remains highly distrustful of a Western dominated international system that it considers unequal and unfair, advocating a greater role for developing countries in global governance. Seen from this perspective, Beijing may well be complying only for as long as it serves its immediate national interests. Recent scholarship on China's socialisation seems to corroborate this proposition. In a study comparing Chinese aid in three different countries in Southeast Asia, James Reilly⁸ concludes that while China's socialisation into international aid norms and practices seems to be occurring in contexts where there are strong institutions and extensive international aid presence agencies (Cambodia and Vietnam), its conduct remains averse to international aid norms and largely self-interested and opaque in countries like Myanmar. This suggests that China's compliance with the extant normative paradigm is more driven by external constraints than by actual internalisation of those norms. Gregory Chin⁹ contends that after a long period of socialisation, China is now actively engaged in changing norms and practices of World Bank institutions from within. According to Chin, through a memorandum of understanding between the World Bank and the China Exim Bank signed in 2007 Beijing has been pushing the institution to accept new operational norms in co-financed loan packages. This new development is to a large degree the result of China's emergence as a co-donor with the World Bank and its growing financial clout in developing regions, which combined have positioned China's relationship with the World Bank in a more equal footing. The weakening of western leadership and Bretton Woods' institutions in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis has opened a window for China to become more assertive in pushing forward its preferred norms and practices in recent years. While continuing to selectively internalising global norms, China has started to imprint some of its alternative norms to these institutions, a process that Chin calls 'two-way socialisation'.

Building on the above, this article argues that China's growing thrust to establish dialogue platforms with different regions in the developing world (or 'global south') since 2000 illustrates a

⁶ Elizabeth Economy, 'The Game Changer: Coping with Chinese Foreign Policy Revolution', *Foreign Affairs* 89(6), (2010), pp. 142-152

⁷ David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) p. 153

⁸ James Reilly, 'A Norm Taker or a Norm Maker? Chinese aid in Southeast Asia', *Journal of Contemporary China* 21(73), (2012) pp. 71-91.

⁹ Gregory Chin, 'Two-Way Socialization: China, the World Bank, and Hegemonic Weakening', *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 19(1), (2012), pp. 211-231.

parallel dimension in its quest to reshape global governance and the dominant normative paradigm. A normative power does not become one by self-declaration, it needs to be recognised as such by others, its norms and practices need to be accepted and internalised as the normal standard in international life. By strengthening its institutional ties with other developing regions, China is hoping to socialise to its norms and practices this part of the world, which due to its discomfort *vis a vis* the dominant neo-liberal order is potentially more permeable to Beijing's alternative paradigm. Emilian Kavalski argues that China's attempt to become a global normative power is building on three key intertwined steps: i) generating locally appropriate interactions (dialogical relationships) "(...) that allows for the ongoing reassessment of preferences and expectations between participating actors as well as the modification and tweaking of strategies."¹⁰; ii) constructing deliberate relations that provide a facilitating environment for learning and socialisation of target states; iii) instigating nascent communities of practice. Notwithstanding these effort, as this article argues, the deliberate and continuous practice of interaction with communities of states in the developing world does not necessarily ensure success.

Chinese foreign policy is tactical and pragmatic, evolving in response to changing circumstances. But scholars like Glaser and Medeiros argue that over the longer term, China's strategic goals remain essentially unchanged, i.e. to re-establish China's premier standing within the regional and international order. This includes replacing US strategic primacy in East Asia, something that regional leaders like Lee Kwan Yew regard it as 'natural' for a great civilization to aspire to be restored as the number one power in the world.¹¹

Martin Jacques puts forward an alternative interpretation not based on the alarmist tenets of realism underpinning 'power transition theory' but rather is loosely drawn from historical sociology. Jacques suggests that because of its origins as a 'civilizational power' that pre-dates Western modernity and the formation of the contemporary international system, far from seeking conformity with the prevailing order, China's rise will necessarily and fundamentally alter the nature of international politics.¹² Concepts like *tianxia* ('all under heaven') have been resurrected by Chinese and Western scholars to explain the historical conduct of Imperial China in its diplomatic relations with its neighbours, a system that was rooted in a hierarchical framework of international relations centred around the emperor.¹³ Though still a minority view, and one that runs counter to thrust of current Western policy making towards Beijing, this Sino-centric approach is gaining some currency amongst scholars.¹⁴ According to Zhang and Buzan, this form of *Pax Sinica* produced consistent discourses at the centre which emphasize societal stratification – with the cultural superiority of China asserted – but were characterised by extreme variation and institutional

¹⁰Emilian Kavalski, 'The Struggle for Recognition of Normative Powers: Normative power Europe and Normative power China in context', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 48(2), (2013), p. 261.

¹¹Bonnie S. Glaser and Evan S. Medeiros, 'The Changing Ecology of Foreign Policy Making in China: The Ascension and Demise of the Theory of 'Peaceful Rise'', *The China Quarterly*, 190 (2007), pp. 291-310; also see Graham Allison and Robert D. Blackwill, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2012), p. 2.

¹² Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World*, updated edition, (London: Penguin 2012), pp. 15-21; 340-341.

¹³ Yongjin Zhang and Barry Buzan, 'The Tributary System as International Society in Theory and Practice', *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 5(1), (2012), pp. 12-16. They characterise it as a 'hegemonic construction';

¹⁴ Amongst others, see Zhou Fangyin, 'Equilibrium Analysis of the Tributary System', *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 4(2), (2011), pp. 147-178; Yongjin Zhang and Barry Buzan, 'The Tributary System as International Society in Theory and Practice', *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 5(1), (2012), pp. 3-36

weakness in their actual operation.¹⁵ The creeping employment of Confucian tenets in framing Chinese foreign policy by the leadership adds further credence to the notion of it seeking to present itself as a 'civilizational power'.

It is in this context that China's involvement with regional forums needs to be placed. For the last decade China has embarked on a series of initiatives aimed at fostering its own unique regional arrangements with the developing world. These take the form of a set of 'forums' that give preference to Chinese interests in the first instance, are supported by Chinese finance and shaped by Chinese values, all in all collectively projecting a vision of a veritable Chinese form of multilateralism. In examining these regional forum initiatives, it is our contention that one can get a clearer understanding of the defining norms and practices which inform Chinese foreign policy towards the international system. Moreover, a comparative study of China's forum diplomacy provides insight into the debate on socialisation in interesting and unexpected ways, as will be made apparent in the rest of the article.

China and 'Forum Diplomacy' in the Developing World

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China's involvement in regional organisations in the developing world is closely linked to the aim of furthering its leadership role in the global south. The willingness to engage with existing regional organisations, started with the expressed desire to meet ASEAN more regularly by Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen in 1991, which culminated in China's participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum and its formalised acceptance as an ASEAN 'dialogue partner' in 1996. This standing was raised further with the setting of a 'strategic partnership' with ASEAN in 2003. At the dawn of the 21st century Beijing's diplomatic courtship reached out to developing regions further afield: Latin America and Africa. In 2004 China joined the Organisation of American States (OAS) as a permanent observer. In that same year the Chinese National People's Congress signed a cooperation agreement with the Latin American Parliament (Parlatino) and in January 2009 it joined the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) as a donor. This diplomatic courtship to Latin America culminated in the recent establishment of a dialogue platform with the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States - CELAC (China-CELAC Forum) which first inter-ministerial meeting was held in January 2015. With respect to the African continent, China has been much more assertive in its diplomatic courtship, having created the Forum for China Africa Cooperation - FOCAC - in 2000; followed by a gradual revitalisation of its participation in the African Development Bank (a member since 1985) and the African Union (permanent Mission in 2015) whilst building up relations with some African sub-regional organisations. These developments in the foreign policy sphere have their parallels in the foreign economic policy arena with the establishment of a Free Trade Area with ASEAN in 2010, whilst negotiations are underway with Mercosur and the Southern African Customs Union (SADC). A number of bilateral FTAs have been signed with smaller economies in the developing world, namely Chile in 2006, Peru in 2010 and Costa Rica in 2011. To this adds the signing of currency swap agreements to settle cross border trade with an increasing number of countries in these regions, the generous extension of bilateral development financing and even the creation of financial instruments such as the China Africa Development Fund (CADF) in 2007 and the more recent multilateral banking institutions mentioned above.

Against this backdrop, the question arises as to why Beijing would wish to pursue a policy of establishing a unique set of formalised relationships with regional groupings of developing countries? And, in so doing, to engage them not through any of the type of 'partnership' configurations already in use, but rather by devising its own unique diplomatic apparel, that seems to privilege 'forum diplomacy'?

¹⁵Yongjin Zhang and Barry Buzan, 'The Tributary System as International Society in Theory and Practice', *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 5(1), (2012), pp. 30-31.

In this regard, the set of regional forum arrangements complements prevailing bilateral ties that China has alongside with members as well as feeding into Chinese relations with regional and international organisations, providing opportunities to discuss matters of mutual concern and develop common policy perspectives. Importantly, they do so outside of the direct shadow of Western influence – the US and the EU, for instance, are not included as members in the China-CELAC Forum or the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation. By the same token, they are bodies that facilitate discussions of deeper economic involvement and can also serve as a site for devising policies and cementing practices that reflect more accurately the interests of the key provider of ‘public goods’ to the forum, China. Moreover, as a founding member with the most pronounced role in supporting these regional forms (financially and administratively), Chinese values, preferences, and interests are bound to feature more readily in structures, internal procedures, norms setting, policies and deliberations of these regional forums than in any of the pre-established counterparts. Indeed, by selectively expanding these forums further to include institutionalised features such as secretariats, development funds and parallel initiatives such as ‘business forums’ and ‘think tank forums’, Beijing is slowly raising their stature and signalling their importance within the broader panoply of its other formalised diplomatic relationships within the international system, while at the same time creating alternatives to dominant global institutions, particularly in the development financing realm.

The creation of its own multilateral platforms reflects China’s aspirations to shape the rules of regional cooperation and by doing so foster a predictable behaviour from its counterparts and consequently a peaceful external environment that is favourable to domestic growth and the expansion of its interests abroad while simultaneously dispelling concerns about China’s rise.¹⁶ Increasingly they offer opportunities to display Chinese particularist approaches to issues of importance to developing countries like modalities of modernisation or humanitarian intervention.¹⁷ In short, they become emblematic of Chinese efforts to site and order their foreign relations within a structure that reflect their vision of a harmonious global order without the overlay of Western influence.

It is important to note that while the creation of this network of regional forums is ascribed in this article as being ‘Beijing-instigated’, in fact in a strict sense this has not always been the case. For instance, in the case of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum, it was inspired by FOCAC and apparently accepted with some reluctance by Beijing.¹⁸ The debate over the creation of a regional forum between Latin American states and China, something that Beijing reportedly sought, took place over a number of years before the contours were finally agreed upon.¹⁹ However, while there might be some debate as to the origins of the idea to create a particular forum, there is no doubt as to the centrality of Beijing in the decision to pursue the initiative, to give it institutional meaning and provide the requisite financial and diplomatic support to keep it running.

China and Two Case Studies of Regional Forums

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The cases chosen are found in the developing regions of the world, with one of them, the FOCAC involving the continent of Africa and the second, the Macau Forum, cutting across regional

¹⁶ Chien-Peng Chung, ‘China’s Approaches to the Institutionalization of Regional Multilateralism’, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 17(57), (2008), p. 748

¹⁷ Suisheng Zhao, ‘The China Model – can it replace the Western Model of modernization?’ *Journal of Contemporary China*, 19(65), (2010), pp. 419-436

¹⁸ Interview with Sudanese diplomat, Shanghai, September 2010.

¹⁹ Interview with senior members of CAF (Latin American Development Bank), June 2013.

divisions to embrace Lusophone countries across Africa, Southeast Asia, South America and southern Europe. Both regional forums represent the earliest expressions of regional forum diplomacy and, as such, have well over a decade of experience that presents significant insights into the process, interactions and challenges facing this initiative.

Forum for China-Africa Co-operation

The origins of the FOCAC process are to be found in a variety of converging factors. The economic context of China's 'going out' strategy was significant, bringing with it a need for key resources which Africa could readily supply. Politically, there was a renewed push to counter Taiwan's so-called 'dollar diplomacy' on the continent, which had succeeded in winning back official recognition from a number of African states by the early 1990s. This corresponded with the broader aims of revitalizing diplomatic ties with the developing world in the wake of Tiananmen and the accompanying Western opprobrium and sanctions.²⁰

President Jiang Zemin and Li Peng's Africa-Asia tours in 1996 and 1997,²¹ respectively, were a prelude for the full revival of Africa in China's foreign policy that materialized at the dawn of the 21st century. Responding to calls by African diplomats for a China-Africa diplomatic forum,²² President Jiang Zemin formally proposed the launching of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). During the build-up to the event, African ambassadors in Beijing served, along with their counterparts in what was initially an ad hoc unit within the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as a *de facto* secretariat for organising the first FOCAC ministerial meeting. Held in Beijing in 2000, a total of 80 ministers from China and Africa participated along with representatives from African regional economic communities and the private sector. The agenda was decidedly mixed, with a commitment to increase trade, provisions were made for strengthening development co-operation through expansion of Chinese credit facilities, and a commitment to monitor and reduce the flow of Chinese small arms, all contained in the final conference declaration.²³ More general statements in the declaration included support for the 'one China' policy, the centrality of the UN to global governance and the dangers of 'hegemony' for the international system, advocacy for an African seat in a reformed UN Security Council and an endorsement of the universality of human rights while ascertaining the right of states to pursue their own approaches towards this issue. A joint China-Africa Business Council was established.

The first action plan established a three level follow up mechanism with the aim of providing a platform to discuss and assess the Forum's progress in cooperation. At the top sits the FOCAC Inter-ministerial meeting that meets every three years; in between the Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) meets twice ahead of FOCAC (1 year before and again a few days before); and at the bottom level the Chinese Follow-up Committee is to hold regular meetings with the African diplomatic corps (every two to three months). The FOCAC Follow up Committee, which is in charge of running daily operations and coordinate follow up actions (the *de facto* secretariat of FOCAC) is led by the African Department at MOFA in close coordination with officials from

²⁰ Ian Taylor, *The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)* (London: Routledge 2011) pp. 20-22; 38.

²¹ When these tours took place not only was the Taiwan issue on the table but also a resolution on China's human rights situation was being voted in the Human Rights Commission.

²² Ambassador Liu Guijin, SAIIA-RAS pre-FOCAC conference Misty Hills, Muldersdrift, South Africa, September 2006; Li Anshan et al, *The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation: from a sustainable perspective* (Beijing: World Wildlife Fund, 2012), p. 10.

²³ Beijing Declaration, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beijing 2000. For two interpretations of the Declaration, see Li Anshan et al, *The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation: from a sustainable perspective* (Beijing: World Wildlife Fund, 2012), p. 31; Ian Taylor, *The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)* (London: Routledge 2011), pp. 41-44.

MOFCOM and the Ministry of Finance, with no direct participation from African countries. There is thus no joint secretariat or other monitoring entity.

The second FOCAC ministerial meeting took place in December 2003 in Addis Ababa under the auspices of the Ethiopian government but within sight of the newly established African Union with 70 ministers from China and Africa participating along with representatives of the regional economic communities and private business.²⁴ Most notable in the declaration was the firm commitment to raise two-way trade to US\$30 billion by the next FOCAC meeting, the forgiving of debt owed by 31 African countries, to support the UN and African regional organisations in their efforts to promote peace, and to combat terrorism and ‘hegemony’ in international affairs.²⁵

It was, however, the third FOCAC summit held in Beijing in November 2006, that attracted world’s attention by bringing together the largest number ever of African leaders in a summit outside the continent. The final declaration of FOCAC III called for an increase in trade to US\$100 billion by the next ministerial meeting as well as commitments to reduce tariffs on 440 items produced by Africa’s least developed countries, the creation of a US\$5 billion China-Africa development fund (CAD Fund) and numerous small grant and training programmes.²⁶ It reiterated the ‘one China’ policy, the need for reform of UN institutions and China’s commitment to supporting African positions in multilateral affairs

Regarding the process itself, in the build-up to this first FOCAC event the pattern of engagement was established with officials from China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs developing a preliminary agenda for the conference, sharing it with the African ambassadors based in Beijing, who would then respond (presumably interacting with their government back home) and, ultimately a shared programme would be developed.²⁷ A series of preparatory meetings between Chinese diplomats and African officials – and in those instances when African governments were to serve as hosts, between Beijing and the African government in question – hammered out the detailed programme for the FOCAC and logistical arrangements in the build up to the actual event. For some African officials involved, however, the process has depended too much on Chinese inputs and initiatives in setting the agenda.²⁸ Chinese diplomats counter with their continuing concerns as to the fragmented African contribution, noting the frequent disconnect between African diplomats in Beijing and decision makers in their capitals.²⁹ Irrespective of the joint long term planning involved in FOCAC, African officials say that they remain unsure as to Chinese position until the actual opening of the summit when formal announcements of commitments to particular policies are made by Chinese leaders.³⁰ The public announcement of the FOCAC declaration concludes the ministerial meeting, along with the issuing of an action plan. However, AU officials note that the absence of an established monitoring and evaluation mechanism for commitments made with each FOCAC action plan has meant that there is no empirical basis upon which to measure whether Chinese assistance has met its targets and its impact.³¹ At this point, AU officials are lobbying Beijing to accept usage

²⁴ Li Anshan et al, *The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation: from a sustainable perspective* (Beijing: World Wildlife Fund, 2012), pp. 33-34.

²⁵ “Beijing Action Plan-2007-2009”, Forum on China Africa Cooperation, accessed March 10, 2015, www.focac.org/en/Itada/dscbzjhy/DOC32009/t280369.htm,

²⁶ *Ibidem*

²⁷ Interviews with African ambassadors, Pretoria, January 2012; SAIIA-RAS pre-FOCAC conference Misty Hills, Muldersdrift, South Africa, September 2006.

²⁸ Interview with South African official, Pretoria, May 2014

²⁹ Interviews with officials from South African Department of Trade and Industry, Pretoria, 28 November 2007. African ambassadors commentary, SAIIA-RAS pre-FOCAC conference Misty Hills, Muldersdrift, South Africa, September 2006.

³⁰ Interview with South African official, Pretoria, May 2014

³¹ Interview with AU officials, Johannesburg, February 2015.

of the AU's monitoring and evaluation instrument based within its New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) division.

Linked to these concerns is the persistent desire to formally bring the FOCAC process within the AU's Global Partnerships division, which could function as a permanent secretariat within the regional organisation (much as it already does for the AU's other global partnerships). Preliminary discussions between Chinese and African representatives held in the preparations for FOCAC IV attempted to involve the AU as both a representative and a potential site for a permanent secretariat. Indeed, the Chinese asserted that they supported the inclusion of the AU but talks floundered due to disputes amongst African countries, the most significant being the involvement of Morocco (which withdrew from the continental body's predecessor, the Organisation for African Unity, in protest of its support for the Polisario).³² However, in the wake of the fourth FOCAC ministerial in Egypt in November 2009, one of the key obstacles was overcome. Using a formula derived from the EU-Africa Summit, whereby Morocco was involved (EU-Africa + Morocco) without challenging the respective positions of member states on this dispute seemed to have paved the way for a FOCAC permanent secretariat to be housed within the AU by 2012.³³ Despite this promising development, no significant progress has been made to replace existing arrangements centred on regular meetings between the Follow up Committee and the African ambassadors based in Beijing with a secretariat located in AU structures nor any concessions to African calls for Beijing to recognise the AU's special status (at the moment it is treated like other African states) within FOCAC.³⁴ Indeed, there is much frustration with the fact that, of all the formalised global partnership arrangements (including, amongst others, Turkey, India, Korea, Japan, the US and the EU) with the AU, China is the only one that does not conduct the relationship through the AU's executive body, the AU Commission. Chinese resistance to this may be linked to costs involved and logistic complexity inherent to managing 53 states on the African side; however, according to one senior African diplomat, it is due to the fact that 'they want to maintain control over the process.'³⁵

The onset of the fifth FOCAC ministerial in Beijing in July 2012 coincided with the surge in trade and investment, making China the continent's leading trade partner and its top investor. With the new AU headquarters funded and built by the Chinese in 2012, the stage was set for a new phase of more integrated cooperation between China, African states and its leading regional organisation. The announcement by outgoing President Hu Jintao of a 'China-Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security' formalised the desire to expand China's involvement in African security, working with the AU and in conjunction with the UN Security Council. Envisaged were financial support, personnel exchanges, training of peacekeepers and participation in conflict prevention, peace operations and post-conflict reconstruction and development.³⁶ By way of contrast, the sixth FOCAC was convened in December 2015 in Johannesburg against the backdrop of a slowing Chinese economy and with that, nearly 40% fall in two-way trade and an 84% drop in Chinese FDI in 2015.³⁷ Persistent lobbying by South Africa overcame Beijing's resistance to making the event a high-profile summit, and, in response to rising African concerns over the structure of trade (African resources for Chinese manufactured goods and increasingly services), commitments were made by President Xi Jinping to channel some \$10 bn of the \$60 bn in credits and grants towards promoting

³² Interview with Chinese diplomat, Beijing, September 2009.

³³ Interview with South African diplomat, Johannesburg, December 2009.

³⁴ Interviews with South African diplomats seconded to AU, Pretoria, December 2014.

³⁵ Personal communication with senior African diplomat, Johannesburg, February 2015

³⁶ "Beijing Declaration of the Fifth Ministerial Conference of the FOCAC", July 23, 2012, accessed March 15, 2015, <http://www.focac.org/eng/dwjbzjjhys/hywj/t954245.htm>

³⁷ "Africa-China exports fall by 40% after China slow down", *BBC News*, January 13, 2016, accessed May 18, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35303981>; Adrienne Klasan, "Chinese investment in Africa plunges 84%", *Financial Times*, October 21, 2015, accessed May 18, 2016, www.ft.com/cms/s/3/10648918-773b-11e5-a95a-27d368e1ddf7.html.

industrialization in the continent.³⁸ The Agenda for Action released in the wake of the summit mirrored the development plans outlined in the AU's recently launched Agenda 2063.

As demonstrated above, as the FOCAC process has developed over the years so has institutional and procedural complexity. Alongside FOCAC and the Business Forum held parallel to the main event, a number of other sub-forums have surfaced in the wake of FOCAC IV which are held months or weeks in advance of the ministerial meeting. These include China-Africa media cooperation, China-Africa think tank forum, China-Africa young leaders forum; China-Africa people's forum - all instigated and financially supported by Beijing.

These initiatives reflect a shift towards moving beyond declarations of common purpose, which face growing public dissonance in both China and Africa to actions aimed at promoting shared knowledge and most importantly develop a common agenda and set of values. For instance, in 2012, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched an annual funding competition aimed at fostering closer cooperation between Chinese and African researchers. This was reinforced by the formal designation by Beijing of 10 Chinese and 10 African think tanks as partners and as preferred participants in the China Africa Think Tank Forum (CATTF) that are eligible for this funding support. Behind this knowledge exchange and shared research agendas, is an effort by Chinese officials to strengthen the weak research and analytical capacity of its own research bodies on African affairs.³⁹ Moreover, the most recent CATTF conference in South Africa in advance of the FOCAC VI Summit of 2015 focused on common cultural values aligning Chinese and African interests as distinctive and foundational sources of cooperation.⁴⁰ Whilst fostering mutual understanding and common values, these sub-forums have also been increasingly used by Africans to voice their expectations and concerns regarding shortcomings in the relationship, including affirming support for democracy and frustration with the continuing economic asymmetries in the relationship.⁴¹

The Macau Forum

The Macau Forum was established in 2003 to facilitate trade and economic co-operation between China and the Portuguese speaking countries (PSC)⁴² using Macau⁴³ as a linkage platform owing to its long history in bridging Sino and Lusophone worlds. As with FOCAC, China's contemporary interest in the Lusophone world goes much beyond historical ties, being tied mainly in the economic opportunities, but also political interests (namely the establishment of diplomatic ties with Sao Tome & Principe). The PSC markets combined hold a population of 260 million (2014), spread across four continents. Four of these countries sit on massive mineral reserves (Brazil,

³⁸ Personal communication with senior South African diplomat, Pretoria, February 2016.

³⁹ Ambassador Zhong Jianhua, remarks at South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) event, September 2010, Johannesburg. CATTF conferences, 2011, 2012, 2015. The call for improving joint knowledge production and construction of shared Sino-African values is made again at the CATTF II in Addis Ababa in 2012. See Mulugeta Gebrehiwot and Liu Hongwu, eds., *China-Africa Relations: governance, peace and security* (Addis Ababa: IPSS/ZNU 2013), p. 252.

⁴⁰ Discussions at FOCAC Academic Forum meetings, October 2012, Addis Ababa and October 2013, Beijing.

⁴¹ According to observations of the Forums in which the authors have participated (CATTF October 2011 in Hangzhou; CAPF July 2012 in Suzhou; CATTF October 2012 in Addis Ababa). For a flavor of the public form of debates at CATTF in Addis Ababa, see an edited video clip of closing remarks 13 October 2012, accessed May 18, 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=7NSd9oRiqEw.

⁴² Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, Timor Leste, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and Portugal. Sao Tome and Principe is not included in this Forum due to the fact that it has diplomatic relations with ROC.

⁴³ Macau was under Portuguese rule from 1513 until 1999, when it was handed over to China, becoming a Special Administrative Region under Chinese sovereignty.

Angola, Mozambique and East Timor), while Portugal represent an important entry point to the EU, China's largest trade partner.

The initiative to create this Sino-Lusophone Forum emerged from discussions between the Chinese Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) and the Executive Government of Macau SAR not long after Macau's handover.⁴⁴ The intention to realise this endeavour was formalised during an official visit to Lisbon by China's Vice Premier for Economic Affairs in July 2002 and the Forum was formally established in October 2003.⁴⁵ The Macau Forum is to some extent a smaller replica of FOCAC in regards to its aims (promotion of trade and economic co-operation) and institutional process (inter-ministerial meetings every three years and three-year action plans covering basically the same co-operation areas). Unlike FOCAC, Macau Forum is under MOFCOM and has a permanent secretariat based in Macau which integrates permanent delegates from all PSC.

The Permanent Secretariat (PS) is responsible for executing and monitoring the decisions of the ministerial meetings (including the action plan), do all the preparatory work for these meetings, draw an annual plan of activities and ensure the logistics, finances and administration to undertake these are in place.⁴⁶ Although the PS was officially established in April 2004 (following the approval of the first PS' internal statutory rules), it took another three years before the PS was given dedicated facilities in Macau to fully undertake its mandate. The PS runs in mandates of three years and is currently composed by the Secretary General (SG), three adjunct SGs, three offices (executive, liaison and support) and seven delegates, one from each of the represented Portuguese speaking countries. The Chinese government nominates the SG (normally with extensive experience in PSC), one of the adjunct SG and the coordinator of the executive office, all from MOFCOM. The Macau executive nominates one of the adjunct SG and the coordinator of the support office, usually staffed by Macau's Secretariat for Economy and Finance; the Portuguese speaking countries nominate the other deputy SG and the coordinator of the liaison office staffed by the delegates (nominated by their respective countries).⁴⁷

While the Executive Office (staffed by MOFCOM cadres) runs the daily administration and is responsible for the PS contacts with the authorities and business sector in China; the Support Office (staffed by Macau's Executive cadres) provides administrative, logistical and financial support to the PS; and the Liaison Office (staffed by the PSC members) is responsible for the interface with and between the Portuguese-speaking member states. Part of the Forum procedures are also ordinary (once a year) and extraordinary meetings (ad hoc) of the PS which include the PSC Ambassadors in Beijing and the Focal points – PSC liaison cadres located in their respective countries, in most cases based in the ministries of foreign affairs or commerce.

⁴⁴ The idea was publicly vented Macau SAR Chief Executive Edmund Ho during his first term in office (Ambrose So, 'Geocapital – constituir uma plataforma operativa para a cooperação económica e comercial entre a China e os países de língua Portuguesa' [Geocapital – building na operational platform for economic and trade cooperation between China and the Portuguese Speaking Countries], in Secretariado Permanente do Forum Macau (ed.) *Textos do Seminário sobre o Desenvolvimento do Fórum para a Cooperação Económica e Comercial entre a China e os Países de Língua Portuguesa [Proceedings from the Seminar on the Development of the Forum for Economic and Trade Cooperation between China and the Portuguese Speaking Countries]*, (Secretariado Permanente do FCECCPLP: Macau 2005), p. 103.

⁴⁵ Interview, former Portuguese Ambassador to China, London, 18 June 2007.

⁴⁷ Information in this paragraph according to Operational Statute of the Permanent Secretariat of Macau Forum, Approved November 2013 (articles 6 to 15) – courtesy of former delegate from Cape Verde.

⁴⁷ Information in this paragraph according to Operational Statute of the Permanent Secretariat of Macau Forum, Approved November 2013 (articles 6 to 15) – courtesy of former delegate from Cape Verde.

As of now four inter-ministerial meetings have taken place (2003, 2006, 2010 and 2013). According to the four action plans, the forum has seen the areas of cooperation expand from seven to fourteen since its inception. The original areas mentioned in the first action plan included intergovernmental cooperation, and cooperation in the fields of trade, investment and business, agriculture and fisheries, infrastructure, natural resources, human resources. The following inter-ministerial meetings added cooperation in the areas of development, tourism, transport and communications, financial, sports, culture, radio, TV and cinema, health and urban planning.

The enduring relevance of the Forum for its members is reflected in the consistent pattern of high ranking representatives that attended the meetings from both sides, namely Premier and Vice premier levels on the Chinese end which have been reciprocated by Prime Ministers and Presidents on the Lusophone end. Most significantly was the establishment of a US\$1bn development cooperation fund in June 2013 to finance joint projects in PSC in the areas of infrastructure, transport, communications, energy, agriculture and natural resources. The fund, which had been under discussion since 2006, was officially announced by Wen Jiabao at the third summit in 2010 and is jointly financed by CDB and the Macau government.

Beyond the inter-ministerial meetings and the Action plans, the PS daily activities include, among other things, the promotion of high level exchanges; organisation of workshops on transportation, media, health, culture, education, technology; organisation of regular business trade shows; the Lusophone cultural week in Macau (once a year); human resources training workshops, as well as advertising the Forum. The bulk of the annual budget is spent in human resources' development.⁴⁸ According to current practices, activities that take place in mainland China (be it training courses or formal meetings of the PS) are funded by MOFCOM, while the Macau government funds all the remaining budget needs of the PS through Macau's Secretariat for Economy and Finance,⁴⁹ to which the support office reports.

Even though its formal structure may give the Forum a multilateral appearance, the procedures at the operational level uncover a different dynamic, marked by a balance skewed in China's favour. This reality stems from the fact that Beijing retains the policy initiative and provides the bulk of the funding (MOFCOM and the Macau Executive). But this does not come without contestation as internal statutory rules have been revised a number of times since 2004, mostly due to the manifest discontent on the Lusophone end regarding China's upper hand in the structure and institutional procedures of the Forum. When the first PS's statutory rules were being discussed in 2004, the blueprint put forward by the Chinese authorities established that the SG was to be Chinese, which was immediately questioned by the PSC. After tough negotiations, eventually the PSC managed to get the text changed into a more flexible wording: 'the first Secretary General will be Chinese'.⁵⁰ The SG issue came up again in 2008 when the PS statutes were being revised and so the wording was changed to: 'the next' Secretary General will be nominated by China 'after consultations with the other members'.⁵¹ Although PSC are aware that there is only a slim chance that a non-Chinese will ever become SG of the Macau Forum, they insisted in leaving an open window. During this revision of the statutory rules, the PSC also tried (unsuccessfully) to enforce a two-third majority in decision making as opposed to consensus ruling proposed by the Chinese side (meaning China's standing cannot be over-ruled).⁵² This battle seems to have been won by the Chinese side for now as according to the new operational statute of the Forum (2013) the SG is to be nominated by MOFCOM (although it does not specify that it has to be Chinese) and all decision making has to be reached by consensus.

⁴⁸ Information according to interviews conducted in the PS in Macau in October 2007.

⁴⁹ Interview, assistant to the Secretary General of Macau Forum, October 10, 2007

⁵⁰ Interview, former Portuguese Ambassador to China, London, June 18, 2007.

⁵¹ According to article 4 (functions of the PS) of the PS statutory rules approved in March 2008

⁵² Various interviews, Macau Forum, PSC delegates, October 2007 and September 2009, Macau

One other major issue of contention between the PSC delegates and the Chinese counterpart is that the Secretariat lacked a legal statute necessary to clarify its institutional order in Macau and internationally.⁵³ Throughout most of its existence, the PS was formally a mere cooperation mechanism placed under the Macau/Chinese government (and not an international institution), raising delicate diplomatic issues for PSC delegates. The PSC delegates wished to have diplomatic statute for all members to facilitate their mobility and also to dignify the Forum internationally. To some extent this would even out China's weight in the Forum. The clarification of the legal statute was constantly postponed by the Chinese side since the creation of the PS. It was finally approved in November 2013, and in this case partial concessions made to delegates. Although the new statute does not attribute diplomatic statute to the members of the secretariat, it grants them a special identification document that facilitates their mobility within all the member states.

The debate around the statutory rules of the PS and its legal status in Macau since its creation in 2004 illustrate well the tensions stemming from diverse expectations between PSC and China regarding the conceptualisation, structure and modus operandi of the Forum. The formal integration of permanent PSC delegates in the secretariat introduced the seeds of a potential counterweight. The PSC have been steadily pushing for changes from within in an attempt to make the Forum more responsive to their respective countries' expectations and interests and have managed to extract some concessions from China over the years.

According to interviews conducted in Macau with all delegates and at the PSC embassies in Beijing,⁵⁴ the biggest limitation of the Macau forum seems to be that the working methodology is too centralized and the Secretariat's activities are too focused in short term training courses for public officials in Macau or in China. In the PSCs' perspective it would be more useful and cheaper, to send Chinese technicians to each country to administrate longer training programmes, which would capacitate a larger number of attendants. The small budget of the Permanent Secretariat is another limitation pointed out by the Portuguese-speaking members, which combined with a rigid financial plan, does not leave much margin to add extra activities to the annual programme that remains largely determined by the Chinese side. Furthermore, and while China does not object to the extra activities proposed by PSC delegates it holds financial veto as China made clear from the beginning that it was only willing to pay for the activities that take place within its boundaries (China and Macau). Every activity to be held out of China under the umbrella of the Forum was to be funded by the respective country, and in general they lack the funds. This stance, however, seems to be changing in recent years, as the latest Action Plan (2014-2016) mentions the possibility of Human resources training taking place in PSC with Chinese funds,⁵⁵ a clear concession to rising PSC pressure on this specific point.

⁵³ Ivo Carneiro de Sousa, "Institucionalizacao: por um estatuto legal do secretariado Permanente do Forum Macau" [Institutionalisation: for a legal statute of Macau Forum Permanent Secretariat], *Lusofonias 4, Jornal Tribuna de Macau*, July 8, 2013, p. 4.

⁵⁴ Interviews in Macau (delegates of Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau and Mozambique) conducted in October 24 and 25, 2007 and in Beijing between November 9 and December 13 (Ambassadors of Angola, East Timor, Mozambique and Portugal; Economic counsellors of Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau and the Cultural Counsellor of Brazil – at the time the second Adjunct secretary general)

⁵⁵ Forum Macau, *Plano de Accao para a Cooperacao Economica e Commercial da 4a conferencia Ministerial do Forum para a Cooperacao Economica e Comercial entre a China e os Paises de lingua Portuguesa (2014-2016)* [Strategic Plan for Economic and Trade Co-operation of the 4th Ministerial Conference of the Forum for Economic and Trade Co-operation between China and Portuguese-speaking Countries (2014-2016)], November 2013 (points 7.3 and 7.4), accessed March 15, 2015, <http://www.forumchinapl.org.mo/action-plans/?lang=pt>

Like FOCAC, Macau Forum seems to remain very dependent on Chinese funds and agenda. However the creation of a permanent secretariat with permanent delegates (unlike FOCAC) has raised expectations in the Portuguese-speaking members, the African ones in particular, regarding their place in this dialogue platform. The evident discomfort with China's dominant role suggests that these countries are not willing to be just at the receiving end but rather aspire to make their own inputs into the practices, policies and underlying norms of the forum.

Regional Forums – constructing the ‘Sinosphere’ or socialisation from below?

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Recognising the limitations of deriving general principles from only a few cases studies, nonetheless this examination of FOCAC and the Macau Forum (coupled to a cursory reading of other developing country forums) is suggestive of some commonalities in China's approach to regional forums it has with other developing countries. These shared features include: the promotion of norms on sovereignty, 'political equality' and 'mutual benefit'; seeking recognition for Chinese identity as a leading developing country; and the role of the secretariat as a (realised and potential) fulcrum for negotiating the terms of relations between China and region forum members.

Our assessment of the two Chinese-instigated regional forums examined here, namely their evolving structure, suggests that China's ability to ensure its interests is influenced over time by its capacity to maintain effective control over the administrative and financial structures. As a result, when other developing countries seek greater parity in decision making over regional forum – drawing implicitly from accepted norms of sovereign equality of states which underpin the legal framework of most multilateral organisations – they encounter resistance from China. The ensuing challenges to the status quo within regional forum invariably take the form of struggles over the structuring of key administrative organs and the accompanying decision making process and as such are reflective of different norms, interests and expectations held by developing country members. Chinese reactions to these challenges by forum members' in the cases described above, shift between strategies of obstruction and accommodation. Understanding this process provides important insights into the viability of China's professed role as a global leader and normative power within the developing world intent on fostering a more equitable international order commensurate with its own interests.

The Macau Forum is in fact a paradigmatic case in the sense that it reveals a different kind of socialisation of China than commonly described in the scholarly literature. China's regional forum diplomacy has brought into being its own form of 'multilateralism' with a distinctive set of rules (in both FOCAC and the Macau Forum), with the main purpose of generating good will and prestige for Beijing, despite the fact that the overwhelming content of relations in its economic and diplomatic forms still flow through bilateral channels. Nevertheless, in the case of Macau Forum, the formal structure of a Permanent Secretariat is slowly but surely gaining a multilateral dynamic that is seemingly eroding the rules of conduct preferred and promoted by China as demonstrated by the changing dynamics of the Macau Forum secretariat since its creation. The same process is at work in the evolution of FOCAC. The grudging acceptance of longstanding Africans demands to give the AU formal recognition within the FOCAC process remains for now, however, constrained by Beijing's continued resistance to creating a permanent secretariat with shared authority over FOCAC. Retaining control of the agenda and financing of regional forum activities becomes effectively a defensive posture by Beijing to limit potential damage to their image and interests. This is yet another sign that regional forums are not automatically repositories for China's preferred values and interests, but subject to a modification through non-Chinese member state pressures.

In this respect it can be said that China is not only experiencing socialisation into the international community through established, Western-dominated international organisations, but, to a certain

degree, Beijing is also experiencing pressure to socialise by its own regional forums initiatives, where it is subject to the inputs of its developing country counterparts. Thus Chinese foreign policy becomes more attuned to, for instance, the African countries recognised acceptance of external intervention in the area of peacekeeping and peacebuilding in Africa, codified in the AU Constitutive Act and operationalised since 2002, and has to adjust its rhetoric and even practices to accommodate existing African policies at the expense of its long standing non-interference principle.⁵⁶ The extent of this impact on Chinese foreign policy positions is, however, dependent on the degree of assertiveness and coordination of China's counterparts. Beijing's hesitance over formalisation of institutional arrangements, which would almost inevitably empower members by aligning their standing within regional forums more closely with the principle of sovereign equality of states, is a reflection of concerns that such a development would undermine its relative power in these asymmetric relationships.

At the same time, the longer term Chinese ambition of promoting shared values through these developing country regional forums can be understood as an effort to facilitate better cooperation on foreign policy matters. While the absence of institutional rules derived from Western sources was expected to facilitate the grounding of common norms in these regional forums that cohered more closely with Chinese interests, in fact there has been only limited evidence of this phenomenon occurring so far. In fact, developing countries participated in the negotiation of the terms of regional forums and sought to use them to access Chinese resources. These non-Chinese states have, for the time being, been satisfied with the loose arrangements characteristic of regional forum diplomacy but as the cases expounded here suggest, the pressure to expand will bring with them a greater potential for tension over their institutional shape and management, especially with respect to resources. It can be argued that China's relationships with regional forums provides a window on a – for lack of a better phrase – 'Sino-centric' form of multilateralism in the making. Whether this is, following from the recent scholarly debates on China as a civilizational power, a manifestation of a contemporary or nascent form of '*tianxia*' system seems pre-mature and more speculative at this stage.⁵⁷ The assertion, however, that the gap between the 'grand design' of *Pax Sinica* as imagined in the imperial court and its historically contingent institutional and operational forms does appear to find an echo in the contemporary disjuncture between Beijing's presentation of regional forums and their actual features.

Notes on the Contributors

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⁵⁶ See Chris Alden and Dan Large, 'On Becoming a Norms Maker – Chinese foreign policy, norms evolution and challenges of security in Africa' *China Quarterly* 221, (2015), pp. 123-142.

⁵⁷ See Suisheng Zhao, 'Rethinking the Chinese World Order: the imperial cycle and the rise of China', *Journal of Contemporary China* 24(96), (2015), pp. 961-982 and June Teufel Dreyer, 'The "Tianxia Trope": will China change the international system?' *Journal of Contemporary China* 24(96), (2015), pp. 1015-1031.