

Summary of Workshop on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021

### **The Belt and Road Initiative in conflict states: a view from civil society**

On March 4th, 2021, the Shanghai Institutes of International Studies (SIIS), Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) and Saferworld convened an online workshop to discuss a recent PRIF report on the effects of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on conflict states. The workshop was hosted by SIIS and featured Chinese, local and international experts and civil society representatives. It aimed to complement the prevailing geopolitical interpretations of the BRI with an investigation of its local effects, focusing on four especially conflict-affected states drawn from different world regions: Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar and Uganda.

Across two sessions, panelists highlighted the importance of grasping local political dynamics in countries that China invests in. These involve both existing insurgencies and conflicts, as well as potent grievances like uneven development, unattractive and gender-disparate employment opportunities, negative environmental effects, official corruption, land acquisition and heavy-handed securitization efforts. While many of these are issues that long predated the BRI, they have become especially urgent in its wake, and the significant influx of resources into conflict-torn communities has sometimes put a further strain on them. Even within the same country, perceptions of the BRI can drastically differ between winners and losers: for example, while the project is highly popular in Pakistan as a whole and among political elites in Islamabad, ethnic minorities on its periphery are increasingly turning against it due to perceptions of missing out on its benefits and being exploited by outsiders. The centralization of BRI decision-making in the capital has helped with a more efficient implementation, but contradicts Pakistan's federal structure and has generated local resentment to the point of separatist attacks against Chinese nationals and projects.

Panelists concurred on the importance of better civil society engagement that would help Chinese actors build local trust and greater long-term stability for the BRI in the often-fragile host countries. This could take the form of information-gathering or even BRI-specific 'grievance mechanisms' to communicate issues of concern. Speakers highlighted ongoing progress in areas like environmental governance, which has already seen the development of codes of conduct for BRI contractors, as well as corporate social responsibility and livelihood projects. Improving the transparency of BRI projects through active outreach and reliable data repositories, as well as moving from a country- to a community-centric approach were raised as further suggestions. In such efforts, civil society groups would also be crucial partners, and if taken seriously could help improve the BRI's legitimacy in the eyes of skeptical local publics, e.g. by acting as trusted intermediaries for disseminating project information. Conflict issues have so far seen comparatively little attention in BRI decision-making, but awareness for related risks is growing in China as a result of repeated setbacks. Building conflict sensitivity and local context awareness could thus emerge as future areas of cooperation between Chinese enterprises, local civil society and international actors.

An intensely debated issue was the future of China's traditional principle of non-interference in the political affairs of other countries: some participants took the view that infrastructure-building in conflict states was an inherently political act, and that a narrow interpretation

precluded positive engagement especially with subnational communities. Others argued that it remained a key point of distinction from Western competitors and a major factor driving BRI acceptance in host countries, as well as crucial to maintaining good relations with national partner governments. While non-interference will remain a cornerstone of BRI-era Chinese diplomacy, it may be elastic enough to accommodate targeted initiatives like those outlined above, as well as other forms of social outreach that cannot be interpreted as taking sides. Another contentious issue was the feasibility of a 'developmental peace', i.e. the achievement of stability and conflict mitigation through positive economic development perspectives, a key selling point of the BRI in conflict areas. Proponents of this view point to China's own success with this model and argue for its global applicability and potential to mitigate a major root cause of worldwide conflicts, while opponents highlight the failure of such approaches in previous development initiatives, which eventually led to the current emphasis on political inclusion. The question whether the political and economic dimensions of development can be realistically decoupled is likely to remain a dividing line between Western and Chinese initiatives in this field.

The BRI's presence in conflict states is an issue that links ongoing research and dialogue efforts at SIIS, PRIF and Saferworld, and all sides expressed an interest to continue them jointly, including local civil society partners who participated in the event. Conducting comparisons of BRI projects in conflict and non-conflict states, between different locations within the same countries, and with Western-funded projects were all raised as ways to get a clearer picture of the BRI's actual conflict impact. Participants also stressed the need to clearly delineate between the impacts of BRI projects and existing conflicts, ideally by conducting before-and-after comparisons of specific projects. The local field research required for such an approach will hopefully become possible again as the world emerges from the Covid-19 crisis. Future practical outreach and dissemination should also include Chinese businesses engaged in constructing BRI projects, with a focus on strengthening their conflict sensitivity and management capabilities. The network established at the workshop will serve as a platform to jointly investigate these angles and to discuss them in follow-up events, and is open to participation from other partners.