

UNIVERSITY OF BELGRADE

Faculty of Political Science

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At the meeting of the Department of International Studies, held on June 24, 2024, the Master Thesis Defense Commission (hereby the Commission) for the candidate Milan Petković was formed with the following members: prof. dr Aleksandar Milošević, assist. dr Ognjen Dragičević and prof. dr Nemanja Džuverović. The Council for the Second and Third Cycle of Studies has accepted the proposal made by the Department.

After reading the master thesis, the Commission is submitting the following report.

## **R E P O R T**

The master thesis of Milan Petković entitled "Chinese Development-led Peacebuilding - An Alternative to Liberal Peacebuilding?" is 77 pages long and comprised of five chapters, along with the Introduction, the Conclusion and accompanying list of references.

The Introduction of the thesis consists of the background of China's emergence in the field of peacebuilding, its development-led approach to resolving conflict and instituting long term peace, and questions that stem from it. It explains the methodology, purpose of the thesis and why the topic is relevant enough to be examined more thoroughly, while asking the question whether, and to what capacity can Chinese development led peacebuilding challenge the global status quo which is liberal peacebuilding. It is established that both approaches are comparable due to their methods which vary in sequence and emphasis on what is deemed important; for liberal peacebuilding it is individual freedoms, good governance, and democratic statebuilding and only then development; while for China the emphasis falls on state stability which ensures the foundations of development, after which long term peace can be instituted.

The first chapter focuses on examining liberal peacebuilding as the current status quo, what constitutes it, what are its characteristics and how it has impacted the field of peacebuilding, in order to establish the impact and difference of development led peacebuilding later on. It becomes evident throughout the chapter that liberal peacebuilding is founded upon a strong normative basis which requires states to involve themselves in

protecting what liberal democracies call universal rights which is based on the freedoms of individuals to pursue their own ends without the fear of prosecution, and with the guarantees of the sovereign state that rights and freedoms such as religious expressions, equality and freedom of speech, as well as their basic security needs be guaranteed. Liberal peacebuilding, therefore, emphasizes the responsibility of sovereign states in protecting said rights. Failure to do so implies that appropriate measures may be taken, from sanctions to state, to full interventions.

The second chapter examines criticisms of liberal peacebuilding, in order to better understand why developing, conflict and post-conflict states increasingly turn away from western democracies and towards China as a mediator and provider of peace. It is established that liberal peacebuilding is problematic in delivering on its goals and that the process is met with issues from the establishing of a need to intervene, towards the technocratic difficulties and corruption which occur in most cases. The normative claims fall short of the reality on the ground and the perceived universality of liberal notions is more often than not ill received in local communities, who tend to distrust liberal ideals and its western backers. The heavy top down approach in liberal peacebuilding, often focuses around creating and establishing institutions in a society around the concept of good governance which is not prepared to use them to its full extent, while forgetting the need to communicate with locals. On the other hand, neo liberal economic reforms push the already tense society further into despair with privatization and other stringent policies.

To that end, the third chapter finally dwells into the emerging player in peacebuilding, China, and looks into its policies and doctrines on the approach to development, conflict prevention and long term peace. It is established that, while there is no formal policy on peacebuilding, which the Chinese officials see as legacies of colonialism, China sees development as the only answer to resolving the key problem which underlies conflict and tensions - underdevelopment. China has, to that end, focused on developing its policies around its own experience under western colonialism and the Cold War, following which they achieved formidable results in safekeeping peace through the emphasis on development. Chinese president Xi Jinping, as well as other official documents point to the ultimate respect of sovereignty and non-intervention, regardless of the governance system, as the basis in which the international order should operate, including peacebuilding operations which should focus on increasing development capacities rather than instituting liberal democratic institutions and reforms. In order to establish its policies on a more global level, China has created several initiatives which are set to impact and establish a new global order based on

the values China deems most valuable, which it claims are to create a community of shared future for mankind. Chinese development led peacebuilding is based around economic opportunities through the Belt and Road Initiative, which bring projects to underdeveloped, conflict prone and post conflict societies in order to improve their economic standing. Corridors like the CPEC and CMEC in Pakistan and Myanmar have connected rural and urban areas and have created ports, railways and highways all in an effort to create economic opportunities which allows peace to flourish. With that said, the chapter establishes that the Chinese approach appears to be more pragmatic and flexible in that it is not normatively charged like its liberal counterpart, and therefore does not have the normative barriers that prevent it from collaborating and supporting governments which may be less than democratic in nature, and which cannot, or will not, seek western financial aid due to institutional reform requests. China emerges as the ideal alternative, favoring the collective and state over the individual, and which allows underdeveloped states to maintain their state structures while receiving financial capital and investment from China.

Chapter four looks at two case studies which are related to the Chinese approach to peacebuilding and which are heavily engaged in economic and political ties with China. The first case study is that of Myanmar, which has had a turbulent past of rotating military dictatorships since its independence in 1948. China had been the country's main trading partner, albeit both sides being weary. The thesis examines both periods of 2010-2021 when the democratic government in Myanmar held power, and the period after the most recent coup in 2021, which left the country in a state of civil war in some of its conflict prone regions. Here the role of China is established as that of a neutral-at-best actor, whereby its efforts to maintain good relations with the junta, in order to uphold its emphasis on the respect for sovereignty, and out of its own economic interests have to a certain extent expanded the conflict area. On the other hand its engagement with the ethnic armed organizations in securing own interests, and pursuing BRI projects which have minimally impacted local communities and has made its role as a mediator even more complicated.

The case of Pakistan shows how impactful economic development can be in that the CPEC, BRI's flagship corridor, has more or less gained favor with most Pakistani citizens. The case exemplifies how developmental peacebuilding affects a tense in state situation where, in this case, the military and two dominant ethnic groups dictate how and where the benefits of the CPEC will be distributed, making other groups and interest parties dissatisfied. This situation has on several occasions resulted in attacks on government forces and Chinese companies. Despite these, China has implemented its initiatives in full force, approaching all

sides of the conflict, while maintaining a close partnership with the Pakistani military. This case study shows that the overall impact of the BRI and developmental peacebuilding has had a complicated yet generally acceptable and positive outcome.

Finally, the discussion chapter discusses the overall impact of developmental peacebuilding as well as its potential to emerge as the dominant approach in the international order. It attempts to answer the question of whether China has the capacity to “overthrow” liberal peacebuilding. It showcases that while China actively challenges certain aspects of the liberal approach, it actively co sponsors others, making developmental peacebuilding complementary to the former. Furthermore, it becomes evident that Chinese developmental peacebuilding alone cannot overshadow deeply ingrained ethnic or religious conflicts and that partner states must show genuine interest and a desire, along with having favorable state stability, and governance (which are seldom found together in post conflict, underdeveloped, or conflict societies) in order to have a chance at succeeding the Chinese way.

The Commission:

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