Strengthening Responsibility Sharing with South–South Cooperation: China’s Role in the Global Compact on Refugees

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Long perceived as a largely refugee-generating country, China has generally maintained a low profile in the international discourse on refugees. Although it remains a major source of refugees and asylum seekers, in the past 20 years China has also emerged as a destination and transit country. It has also started to demonstrate growing interest in a greater role in refugee affairs,1 in contrast to the United States’ weakening commitment to leading the international community in helping refugees.

In the 2016 United Nations (UN) Summit for Refugees and Migrants, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang pledged to provide additional humanitarian aid of US$100 million. Chinese State media publicized Li’s attendance at the Summit with headlines such as ‘China is taking a leading role in solving the refugee crisis’ and ‘Chinese premier delivers keynote speech at UN General Assembly’. These are early signals of China’s interest in being not only a contributor to, but also a leader in, international refugee affairs.

In addition, at the 2017 Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, Chinese President Xi Jinping promised to provide US$1 billion to international organizations for refugee-related projects in Asia and Africa. In 2017 and 2018, China funded an unprecedented number of refugee aid projects in Pakistan, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Ethiopia, and Zimbabwe through the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children’s Fund, and the World Food Programme. It also offered humanitarian assistance to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, including emergency material aid and construction of facilities. The fact that China formed partnerships with various international organizations to channel Chinese aid, and that the Chinese media publicized such programmes, further reveals China’s interest in pursuing greater influence in international refugee affairs.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that China recently indicated its ambition to lead the global effort to solve the refugee problem. For example, in a statement to the UN General Assembly on 2 November 2017, Counsellor of the Chinese Mission to the UN, Yao Shaojun, stated:

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China advocates the establishment of a new type of international relations based on mutual respect, fairness, justice and win–win cooperation, and the building of a community of shared future for mankind. This concept serves as an important guide to the improvement of the global effort to address the refugee problem.

All of the above represent a shift from China’s previous low-key approach. Several trends relating to China’s recent activities in relation to the negotiation of the Global Compact on Refugees (Refugee Compact), and refugee assistance in general, are worth noting.

First, China’s refugee aid focuses on Asian and African countries as part of the One Belt, One Road initiative. This initiative, first proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2013, aims to strengthen infrastructure, trade, and investment links between China and some 65 other countries. Following this initiative, significant Chinese investments have flowed into Belt and Road countries, and China has an obvious interest in their stability.

It is noteworthy that, in April 2018, China for the first time established its own foreign aid agency, the International Development and Cooperation Bureau, which is in charge of administration of Chinese development aid. It remains to be seen whether China will continue to channel its aid for refugees in partnership with international organizations, or instead do this through the Bureau.

Secondly, despite China’s increasing monetary contribution to refugee aid, it has shown no signs of willingness to engage in resettlement. Apart from having the usual security and social concerns that also concern some industrialized countries, China sees itself as a developing country and part of the global South, and thus with a different share of responsibility for refugees when compared to the global North. China’s growing contribution to refugee assistance may be better contextualized as part of South–South cooperation. Although China is the second-largest economy in the world, its GDP per capita in 2017 was US$8,826.99, less than a seventh of that of the US and a quarter of that of Japan, and even lower than that of Costa Rica. According to World Bank data, nearly 10 million Chinese nationals were still living below the international poverty line of US$1.90 in 2015. Public sentiment in China towards refugees is, at best, mixed. Many Chinese argue that priority should be given to Chinese nationals struggling with poverty, whereas others feel that their own generation’s sacrifice as a result of the one-child policy would be rendered unworthy if large numbers of refugees were to be resettled in China. Premature advocacy for resettlement in China might well be counterproductive, particularly in view of controversy about China’s human rights record.

Thirdly, China shows particular interest in taking a leadership role in solving the Rohingya crisis. In September 2017, it proposed a three-phase solution (cessation of hostilities, repatriation of refugees, and poverty alleviation). China has not only offered humanitarian assistance to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, but has also offered to

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mediate between Bangladesh and Myanmar. This is one of the few occasions where it
has actively sought to play the role of mediator, as the principle of non-interference has
long been a cornerstone of Chinese foreign policy. In October 2018, China facilitated
an informal meeting concerning Rohingya refugees between the UN, Myanmar, and
Bangladesh.

Several factors have probably motivated China’s interest in the Rohingya refugee
situation. Geographically, the displacement is close to China. If not properly man-
aged, there is a risk that 700,000 Rohingya may spill into China or other Asian coun-
tries, causing greater regional instability. Rakhine State in Myanmar, from which the
Rohingya have fled, is also the starting point of the strategically important dual oil and
gas pipelines linking the Andaman Sea and China’s Yunnan province, enabling China to
reduce its dependency on the Malacca Strait.

As in many other areas, China’s view on how to achieve durable solutions to refugee
movements does not echo that of the West. The Rohingya crisis exemplifies such differ-
ences. For example, speaking of the Rohingya refugee crisis at a UN Security Council
meeting on 28 August 2018, China’s Deputy Ambassador to the UN, Wu Haitao, stated
that: ‘the citizenship issue should be resolved, not as a precondition, but during the pro-
cess of repatriation’. When offering China’s observations on the Refugee Compact at a
UNHCR Executive Committee meeting on 2 October 2018, the Chinese Ambassador
to the UN in Geneva, Yu Jianhua, stated that: ‘the international community should pre-
vent the refugee protection mechanism from being used as a tool for intervention of
internal affairs’ – possibly a veiled reference to Myanmar’s citizenship policy towards
the Rohingya. China also objected to the briefing by the UN Fact-Finding Mission on
Myanmar at the UN Security Council on 24 October 2018.

If differences are viewed as good reasons to disengage China in the global effort
to find durable solutions for refugees, then the international community will lose a
potentially valuable player. There is a Chinese idiom ‘qiutong cunyi’, meaning ‘seeking
common ground while shelving differences’, which has long been one of the core prin-
ciples of China’s foreign policy. In the face of the global challenge of large-scale refugee
movements, it is important – and indeed possible – for China and relevant interna-
tional stakeholders to find common ground and ways to develop constructive partner-
ships. For example, UNHCR, the World Bank, and leading scholars have advocated for
development-oriented approaches to refugee assistance; high-ranking Chinese officials
and diplomats have consistently emphasized that poverty and underdevelopment are
among the root causes of displacement which need to be addressed. 3 As the world’s
largest developing country, which has managed to achieve notable economic success,

3 For example, Chinese Permanent Mission to the UN, ‘Statement by Counsellor YAO Shaojun
during the General Debate on the Item of Refugees at the Third Committee of the 72nd Session of
the General Assembly’ (2 November 2017) <http://www.china-un.org/eng/hyyfy/t1507214.htm>
accessed 20 October 2018; Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘Dai Bingguo Meets with
UN High Commissioner for Refugees Guterres’ (3 September 2010) <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg/gis/gjxw/t738076.shtml>
accessed 20 October 2018; GY Wang, PRC Vice Foreign Minister, ‘Remarks at the Opening Ceremony of the Third APC Mekong Sub-Regional
accessed 20 October 2018.
China’s financial and technical support may be valuable for the international community’s ongoing effort in addressing refugee issues through development. Finding common ground, communicating, and engaging in dialogue – on all sides – is necessary, and the Global Refugee Forum and regional mechanisms envisaged by the Refugee Compact may be useful venues for such discussions.

Finally, and importantly, if China is to achieve its aspiration to be a leader in global refugee governance, it will have to convince the international community that it upholds the core principles of refugee protection, including the principle of non-refoulement, and protects refugees within its own borders in compliance with international standards. It is unlikely that any country that does not do so will be able to earn leadership in the field of global refugee governance.