



China and the Global Refugee Crisis

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In January 2017, during his high-profile visit to the United Nations Office in Geneva, Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged RMB 200 million in humanitarian assistance to address the plight of Syrian refugees. He also highlighted the importance of international organisations such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration as coordinators of an effective global response to the ongoing refugee crisis. According to [UNHCR data](#), China has increased its contribution to UNHCR programs significantly in recent years, from USD 2.8 million in 2016 to USD 12.5 million in 2017.

The above trend seems to be at odds with what one would expect, given China's sometimes troubled relationship with UNHCR and its previous record of scant donations to UN agencies in general. However, it is explainable within the overall evolution of China's foreign policy and global strategy, from Deng Xiaoping's "hiding brightness (*taoguang yanghui*)" to the "great renaissance (*weida fuxing*)" under Xi's leadership. Playing a bigger role at the UN and in global governance more generally is now a crucial component of Xi's grand plan to run China as a great power state.

For most of the 20th century, China was a source of refugees escaping wars, civil conflicts and political repression. For example, hundreds of thousands fled to Hong Kong during the years of famine (1959-1961) brought on by Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward and also by the tumultuous Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). However, since the Open Door Policy began in 1978, China – sharing borders with 14 sovereign states – has gradually become a destination for refugees from abroad mostly due to its geographic proximity, political stability and economic development. To most EU countries (and to some extent the U.S. and Canada), how to receive and settle refugees from non-neighboring regions (e.g., the Middle East, Africa and South Asia) is on top of the refugee policy agenda; however, to China, temporary and long-term refugees from next-door neighbours, not from faraway places, pose the biggest challenges. For China, mis-handling refugees from neighbouring countries could lead to not only humanitarian disaster and international reputational loss, but also significant harm to bilateral relations and regional stability. Governments of some of these neighbouring countries, such as North Korea, Myanmar (e.g., ethnic Kachins and Kokangs) and Vietnam, enjoy strong support from the Chinese Communist Party government. Even acknowledging "refugees" exist in these countries could cause tension in their bilateral relations. Moreover, the presence of Chinese diaspora populations in neighbouring regions further complicates the refugee issue for China. Inciting Chinese ethnic pride or sending support to local ethnic Chinese resistance could endanger the Chinese ethnic populations and disturb domestic stability in some

Southeast Asian countries. During violent anti-Chinese riots in Indonesia in 1998, for instance, the Chinese government acted reluctantly to reach out with offers of support to the victims, despite facing calls for an immediate and strong response from popular opinion within China.

Due to political and trans-ethnic sensitivities, the Chinese government's response to refugees in general differs from European and traditional refugee recipient countries, often preferring to arrange "tailor made" and temporary refugee measures on a case-by-case basis. Nevertheless, China has gradually begun to change its refugee policies and strategies in recent years. The most noteworthy case is China's willingness to play a third-party role in the current Rohingya crisis. Leveraging its influence in both Myanmar and Bangladesh, in November 2017 China proposed [a three-stage plan](#), supported by 51 Asian and European countries, calling for support to both Myanmar and Bangladesh to "create the necessary conditions and a good environment" for repatriation of the Rohingyas.

Meanwhile, international migration and refugees are already re-shaping some corners of China. In recent years, Yiwu, a previously quiet town in Zhejiang Province, has transformed into the "world's [Christmas town](#)" – an international commercial hub of consumer goods with extensive global trade and business ties. More than 400,000 foreign nationals from over 200 countries and regions currently reside in the city, of whom the largest groups hail from the Middle East, South Asia, North Africa and former Soviet republics. They run their own schools and even health services. The local government has also issued "humanitarian visas" or short-term visas to immigrants from conflict zones, including Syria.

In response to the increasing number of foreigners residing in the country, China has revised and enacted domestic laws and regulations to institutionalise and better manage the increasing number of foreigners who live and work there, including possible forced migrants from the Middle East, Africa, South Asia and other conflict-ridden regions. For example, the Law on Exit and Entry Administration was passed in 2013 to strengthen the management of foreigners in China, particularly those who are under-documented or whose visas have lapsed.

On the UN Refugee Day (20 June) in 2017, the topic of refugees enjoyed a moment of unusually high [public attention](#) in China's social media. Such an "incident of public attention" (*yulun shijian*) also caught the attention of the international community, to the extent that the Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi, had to speak about China's refugee policy during his [visit to Lebanon](#) three days later: "(R)efugees are not immigrants...(t)he displaced refugees around the world would want to eventually return to their own countries and rebuild their homeland. This is not only what all refugees wish for, but it also complies with the direction of international humanism and the UN Security Council's resolution on political settlement of the Syrian issue."

As the Syrian refugee crisis has deepened, the UN and the international humanitarian community have searched for and proposed new solutions to refugees in general. Such efforts led to the adoption of the [New York Declaration](#) for Refugees and Migrants on 16 September 2016 and a possible Global Compact on Refugees in the near future. While China's stance on refugee issues reflects its main principles of

foreign affairs (such as non-intervention, national sovereignty, and the central role of the UN in global governance) and the particular geopolitical conditions of a potential refugee influx to the country, it has expressed more willingness to contribute to the relevant global agencies and humanitarian relief for refugees. The new proposal of “return with safety and dignity” by the New York Declaration may seem to be a necessary compromise as the result of [the unpreparedness of European societies to host refugees](#), but it incidentally echoes parts of what China has always argued, in particular that “refugees are not migrants”. Such a rare case of overlapping norms may offer some hope for deeper collaboration between UNHCR and China’s handling of refugees in future.

The rise of the Chinese public’s interest in the global refugee crisis also indicates the deepening of China’s global integration. Unlike the previous wave of globalisation – mostly driven by the state and carried by commodities, this new wave of globalisation in China can be viewed as globalisation at a social and individual level. In the long run, the refugee issue will go beyond the diplomatic and political realms in China, as it is not only international reputational gain or loss that the Chinese government would have to consider when making decisions about refugee-related policies.